MAY

COMPLETE WESTERN BOOK *Magazine*

15¢ A COMPLETE $2.00 WESTERN NOVEL

THE COWARD WHO WAGED A ONE MAN WAR

new dramatic $2.00 book-length novel
by NORMAN A. FOX

PLUS OTHER GREAT STORIES

LUCKY LAWMAN— OR GUN-KING?
smash novelet by
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GUNSMOKE MASQUERADE
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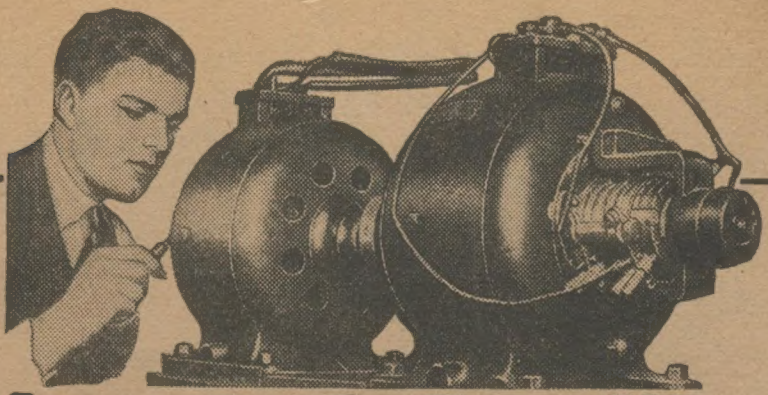

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COMPLETE WESTERN BOOK Magazine

VOL. 13 NO. 4 — A RED CIRCLE MAGAZINE — MAY 1941

WARD MARSHAL
Editor

On Sale the 15th of Every Other Month

★ ★ NEW $2.00 BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL ★ ★

THE COWARD WHO WAGED A ONE-MAN WAR — Page 8

by Norman A. Fox

When war had come to the Flats the last time, who had ridden the justice trail as Black Mask? And when the wolves of the range moved in again, and hot lead slammed too many citizens between their shoulder blades, could the answer be flaming Colts in the hands of a coward who'd buried and forgotten the hell-born heritage of his gun-famous kin!

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THIS IS A SMASHING NEW NOVELETTE BY THE WINNER OF THE 1941 DODD-MEAD $2,000 BEST-WESTERN-NOVEL PRIZE!

LUCKY LAWMAN—OR GUN-KING? — 108

by Peter Dawson

They'd come to brand Russ Ordway owlhooter and rustler, and then Russ would get his chance to rid the country of its most ruthless land-hog—he'd also earn the right to face the range's deadliest six-guns!

★ ★ 2 THRILLING SHORT STORIES ★ ★

Boothhill Bait for Badmen.....by Gunnison Steele 106

The grim-eyed possemen who hammered those gun-dogs' back-trail would need more than hot lead to bring them back for the hangnoose!

Gunsmoke Masquerade.....by Jay Karth 121

The fear in Corey Shannon's heart was not that this killer he was meeting in the dust would fill him with hot lead—what Corey feared was that the badman would not back down!

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Printed in U.S.A.

J. E. SMITH
President
National Radio Institute
Established 25 Years

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BROADCASTING STATIONS (top illustration) employ Radio Technicians as operators, installation, maintenance men and in other fascinating, steady, well-paying technical jobs. FIXING RADIO SETS (lower illustration) pays many Radio Technicians $30, $40, $50 a week. Others hold their regular jobs and make $5 to $10 extra a week in spare time.

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Radio Broadcasting stations employ operators, technicians. Radio manufacturers employ testers, inspectors, servicemen in good-pay jobs. Radio jobbers and dealers employ installation and servicemen. Many Radio Technicians open their own Radio sales and repair businesses and make $30, $40, $50 a week. Others hold their regular jobs and make $5 to $10 a week fixing Radios in spare time. Automobile, Police, Aviation, Commercial Radio; Loudspeaker systems; Electronic Devices are other fields offering opportunities for which N. R. I. gives the required knowledge of Radio. Television promises to open good jobs soon.

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J. E. Smith, President
Dept. 1CK1, National Radio Institute
Washington, D. C.

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7-Day Trial Offer

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NOTE: This is a recent photo of Charles Atlas showing how he looks today. This is not a studio picture but an actual untouched snapshot.

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Then here is a valuable tip for you . . .

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If you really want to get ahead, pick some field of opportunity—either your present field or some other. Find out its opportunities, and its requirements—decide whether you are fitted for it—then get busy. Train thoroughly for it. Make yourself expert in it. Then you can compel success.

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- ☐ Cost Accountant
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- ☐ Cashier
- ☐ Salesman
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- ☐ Correspondence Supervisor
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- ☐ Credit Manager
- ☐ Rate Clerk
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Occupation.....

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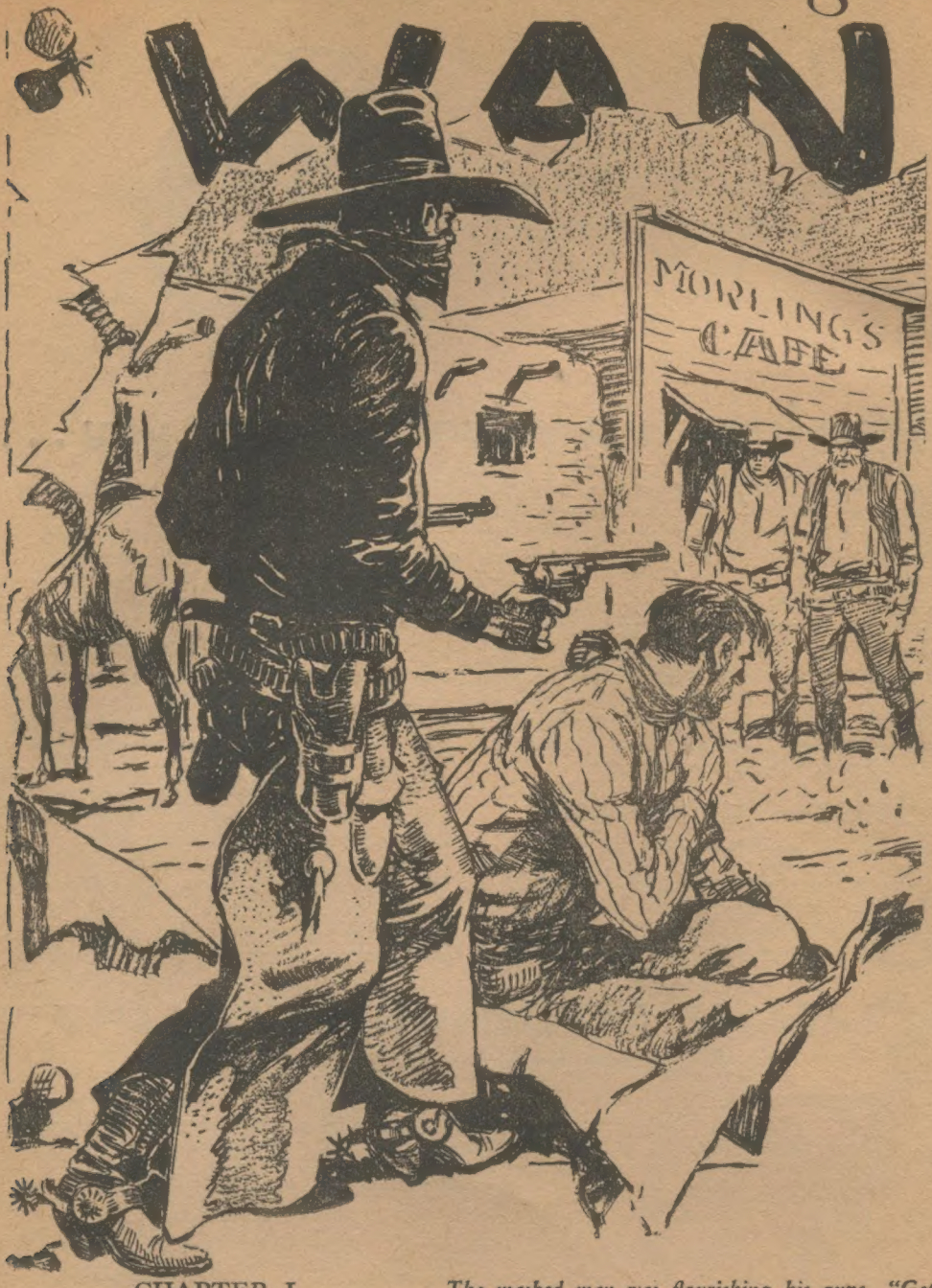
The Coward Who Waged WAR



The masked man was flourishing his guns. "Get back!" he shouted. "I'll kill the first man who lays a hand on Dorgan!"

CHAPTER I

THE DYNAMITERS

THE sun had long since slipped behind the Sawtooths. First those bulking mountains had been purple blotches to the west, their outlines starkly etched by the red of the afterglow. Now they were dark

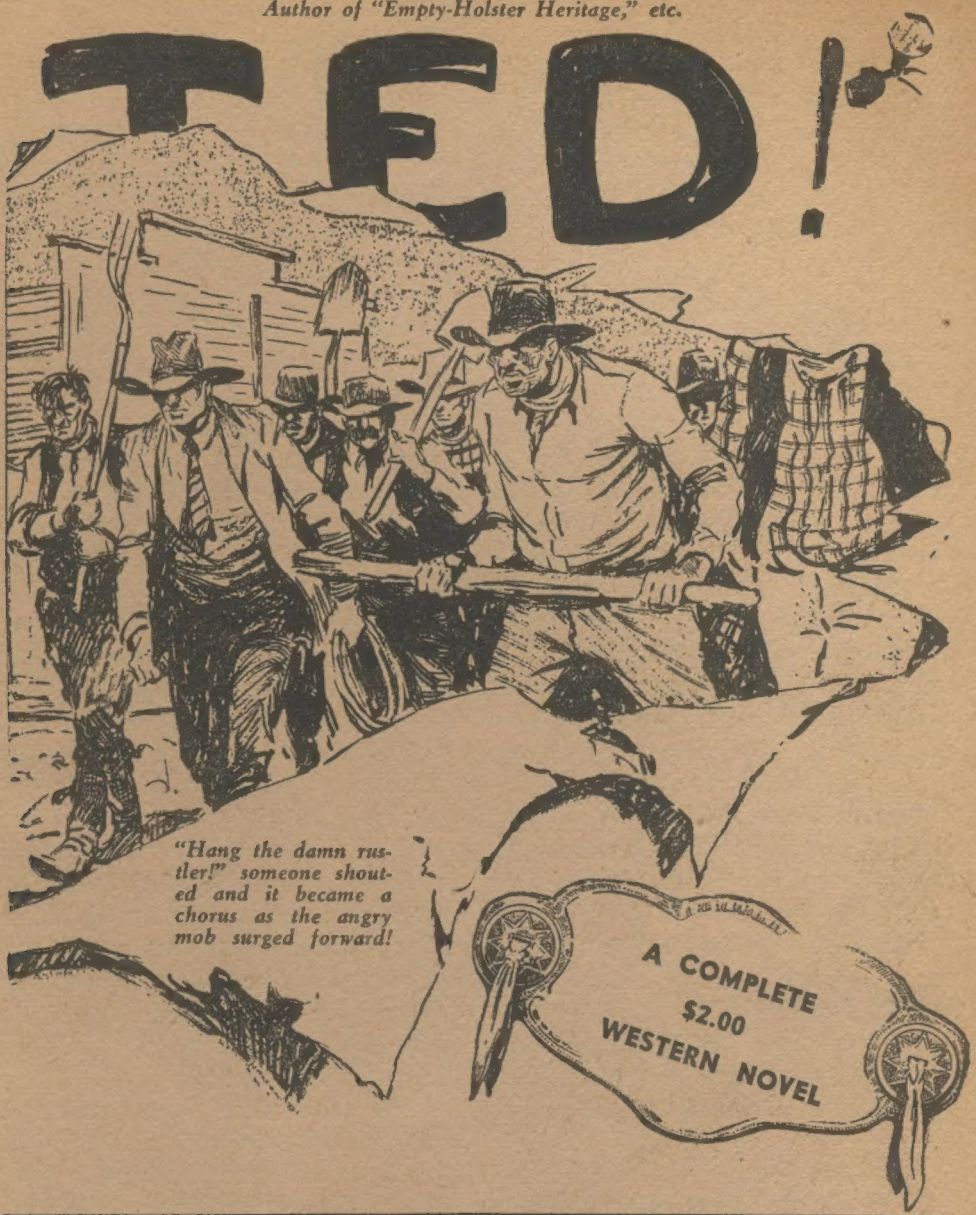
WHEN THE WOLVES OF THE RANGE CALL FOR WIPE-OUT AND HONEST

a One-Man War

By NORMAN A. FOX

Author of "Empty-Holster Heritage," etc.

TED!



"Hang the damn rustler!" someone shouted and it became a chorus as the angry mob surged forward!

A COMPLETE $2.00 WESTERN NOVEL

The hang of their holsters marked the men for what they were, wolves of the range, and sooner or later Wade Mavity knew that hot lead would slam too many citizens between their shoulder blades, and flaming Colts would be the only answer—flaming Colts in the hands of only one man, and that man a coward who'd buried and forgotten the hell-born heritage of his gun-famous kin!

and ominous, a shadow-girded barrier encircling the vast panorama of prairie known as the Frying Flats. Night swathed the rangeland with a brooding silence, emphasized by the distant wail of a coyote and the whisper of

wind slithering through the sage.

To the north and west of Morling, the cow-town that centered the Flats, a half-dozen riders sat their saddles. Like the night they were silent, ominously silent, and they might have been so many shadows among the shadows. Only the lights of their cigarettes, scarlet pin-points against the sable mantle of darkness, betrayed their presence. Sometimes faces were revealed as one or another of them struck a match to re-light a dying smoke. Those faces were alike, hard and predatory and beard-stubbled, and they marked the men for what they were—wolves of the range, men who rode beyond the law or skirted perilously near its edge.

Each was apparently content with his own thoughts as he waited. The one who finally spoke was the smallest of them all, a little fellow with a thin, piping voice that revealed his nervousness. He shuddered.

"What the hell do you suppose is keeping Metcalfe?" he demanded. "He should have been here half-an-hour ago."

"Aw, button yore lip, Shaw," someone said testily. "Steve'll be along. Waitin' won't hurt."

"I don't like this business," Shaw protested. "I don't like it a-tall. Now that Black-Mask is in the saddle again—"

A rider laughed. "Black-Mask, eh?" he repeated scornfully. "Yuh believe that gent's around? Why he's just a name, a name wimin use to scare their kids intuh behavin' themselves. Yuh're supposed to be a growed man, Shaw, even if yuh are a half-pinter. Next yuh'll be tellin' us yuh're afraid o' hob-goblins!"

Little Shaw shuddered again. "Go ahead and laugh," he whined. "But I saw the galoot myself! It was up near Best Chance, the old ghost-town in the north Sawtooths, about a week ago. I was riding up there alone, come sunset. An' I could feel eyes on me as I loped along. Them eyes kept a-crawlin' up my spine till I felt plumb spooky. I kept listening and looking back but nobody was in sight. Then I happened to glance up and there, on top of a cut-bank with the sky behind, was—"

"An old pine tree," someone supplied and earned the applause of a general laugh.

"It was Black-Mask," Shaw shouted. "He had the mask that give him his name and he was wearing black chaps, black shirt and black sombrero and he was ridin' a damned long-legged black horse. He was just the way folks described him. You can't tell me it wasn't him. I heard about that gent as far away as Texas. And I heard about him again in Wyoming. Now I'm right on his old stamping grounds. And he's here, I tell you!"

"You're gettin' as scary as a jack-rabbit," he was told. "Yuh been listenin' to a lot of old-timer's talk. Shore there used to be a gent callin' hisself Black-Mask. But that was twenty years ago and he ain't been seen since. Where's he been all this time? And why should he show up now? Yuh been seein' things!"

"He come when there was trouble on the Flats before," Shaw insisted. "And you've heard just how he put an end to that trouble. Now there's trouble again and he's back to take care of it. That's why he's showed up. And us gents that ride for the Big Boss are the one's that's causin' the trouble. *He's after us!*"

"Wa-al, supposin' he is," the other growled. "He can stop a bullet, same as anybody else, can't he? If he tangles in our wool the Big Boss will figger a way to take care o' him, pronto."

Shaw's voice trembled. "I don't like it," he said doggedly. "The whole

damn business is loco. Here we're workin' for a gent we've never seen. We take orders from Steve Metcalfe and Steve claims he's never set eyes on the Boss either. It don't make sense. And now we're gonna be fightin' a gent we've never seen—Black-Mask."

THE one who had argued with him began to voice fresh arguments but he never finished them. A rider bulked in the darkness, a broad, barrel-chested man, and silence shrouded the six again. But there was a nervous movement toward holsters that proved that more than one had shared Shaw's uneasiness.

"It's me—Steve," the newcomer announced arrogant-voiced. "You jaspers bring the stuff I told yuh to?"

"I've got the dynamite," one replied. "Pinto's packin' the fuse and caps. What in hell we gonna do, Steve? Yuh got orders?"

"You bet," Steve Metcalfe replied. "We're ridin' to the Leaning Circle, savvy. We're gonna blow Bart Mavity sky-high."

"Mavity," the man with the dynamite echoed. "That coot! Yuh mean to say the Big Boss wants him put out of the way? Why, Mavity's harmless as a gopher! Half the orders the Big Boss passes out don't make sense and this is shore as hell one of 'em!"

"They don't have to make sense," Metcalfe snarled. "The Boss' money makes sense, don't it? But if yuh gotta know, Bart Mavity has been asking a few questions around Morling about the Big Boss and I reckon the chief's kinda shakin' some in his boots. Bart Mavity's a queer one, but he's just the galoot that's smart enough to figger out his own answers. Reckon the Big Boss wouldn't want that to happen."

"But, hell—dynamite! Why can't we just put a bullet where Mavity's suspenders cross?"

"This is gonna be an accident," Metcalfe explained petulantly. "Mavity lives alone. Maybe he's got dynamite on his place for all anybody knows. Maybe it goes off, savvy? That'll be just too bad but after the funeral—if there's enough left for a funeral—the whole thing will be forgot. Bart Mavity's an old-timer hereabouts and he's got plenty of friends. Don't forget that. If he got shot, them friends would be plumb riled. Especially since Mavity's always been such a peaceable gent. When some gun-slinging galoot gets his, folks generally figger it had to come sooner or later. But when a gent like Mavity gets shot, folks start puttin' on war paint."

His speech finished, he paused for a moment and his very silence was a challenge. "If everybody's through beefin', we'll be ridin'," he said and touched spurs to his mount.

The six followed. Together the little knot of horsemen moved through the darkness and the miles slid behind them. The coyote wailed again, nearer this time, and the wind in the sage was like a weird threnody. The twinkling lights of Morling-town faded in the distance and the eastern wall of the Sawtooths reared before them as they neared Mavity's Leaning Circle.

Then the silent riders were upon the place. A squat, deserted bunkhouse loomed ahead and the corrals and outhouses were discernible too. The ranch-house—if the building could be glorified by such a name—was not so easy to see for the home of Bart Mavity was a tar-papered shack that blended with the night. Only the rectangle of light that was the window marked its location to the marauders.

Steve Metcalfe halted his men at a distance. He studied the place in silence, then issued whispered orders.

"Pinto, yuh've handled dynamite before. Yuh too, Laramie. Snake up there and plant the stuff. An' be damn quiet about it. We'll keep yuh covered."

Obediently two of the riders dismounted and the darkness swallowed them. To those who waited the pair seemed to be gone for hours, but finally they glimpsed a cupped flame as a fuse was ignited. Shortly afterwards the two re-appeared to swing into their saddles.

"I cut a five minute fuse," Pinto reported. "It'll give us plenty of time to get out of here, but we'd better git pronto. Mavity's inside. I could hear a rockin' chair creakin'. He was probably readin'. Hear tell the damn fool spends a helluva lot of time with his nose in a book. Reckon he'll finish that one in hell!"

They eased away, walking their horses at first and then, when the distance was great enough so that the thunder of hoofs would not carry back to the tar-papered shack and betray them, they put their mounts to a gallop. And the way each man sank steel into horseflesh showed his desire to stretch distance between himself and the doomed shack.

"Wish we could make it to Morling and fool folks into thinkin' we was there all the time," Metcalfe bellowed. "But we don't need to give a damn about that. It'll be an accident, savvy, just like the Big Boss planned—"

HIS words broke in the middle. Suddenly the earth was trembling beneath them and the roar of exploding dynamite shook the silence of the night, splitting it asunder. Behind them, the flare of the explosion thrust red-tipped fingers against the sky.

"There she goes," Steve Metcalfe chuckled. "That's the end of one gent who was too nosey for his own good."

Satisfied, he loped on. He had done his work well, had Steve Metcalfe. He was a wolfish leader of a wolfish pack. He was unimaginative and certainly not endowed with clairvoyant powers. He couldn't know that the reverberations of that explosion would continue to shake the circle of land known as the Frying Flats in the days to come. For Steve Metcalfe had blown the lid off hell this night.

CHAPTER II

Trouble Town

GRIEF had had its way with him, and the aftermath of grief, and now Wade Mavity was bored. Like most of the small scattering of passengers in the day coach of the train that chugged monotonously across the unfettered miles of Montana prairie, he lay sprawled on the plush-covered seat. He had draped a handkerchief over his face to ward off the cinders that persisted in finding a way into the car but the handkerchief had fallen to the rumbling floor unheeded.

His fellow passengers were mostly people who had boarded the train since the crossing of the Dakota line. They were stockmen and since the cut of Wade's gray business suit identified him as an Easterner, they left him to his own devices though Wade would have gladly talked to anyone.

He was a young man, nearer twenty than thirty. Curled in the seat, he maintained a lithe grace that spoke of trained muscles. Thick hair, dark brown and curly, crowned him and two laughing eyes belied the firmness of

his mouth and chin. When he stood erect to stretch himself, as he often did, he crowded the luggage rack for he was fully six feet tall. Broad shoulders and slim hips gave grace to his proportions.

It wasn't until the mountains appeared, far to the west, their hazy outlines gouging the limitless blue, that he roused himself from his travel-induced lethargy to crane his neck from the window in almost hungry eagerness. Wade Mavity was coming home and those nebulous peaks loosened a forgotten spring of memories.

"Like to buy them mountains, stranger?" someone drawled.

Wade swung around. Across the aisle was a young man who had boarded at the last stop. He was a lanky fellow, folded in many places to accommodate his body to the seat. Beneath his wide-brimmed sombrero a shock of curly corn-colored hair was plastered to his forehead. He too had laughing blue eyes and his entire face spoke of a joyous nature that refused to be confined. From sombrero to spurs he was a product of the country through which they passed.

Wade smiled. "You selling those hills?" he asked.

"Not legal like, so's to speak," the puncher replied. "I reckon the law around these parts would take offense if I was to swap off the Sawtooths seeing as how my worldly possessions consists of this sombrero I'm wearin'—and they an I.O.U. ag'in that."

"Down on your luck, eh?" The Easterner extended a hand. "I'm Wade Mavity. From Chicago."

"Buck Callahan," the other supplied and thrust a huge hand to meet Wade's. "From Nowhere on a round trip back. Lost my cayuse, along with the saddle, last night and all over a pair of pretty faces."

Wade grinned, for there was something mighty likeable about this carefree young puncher. "The ladies are your weakness, I take it?"

"The ladies was on a pair of face-cards," Buck explained. "The game was poker. Another hombre had 'em."

"Where you heading now?"

"Morling. I'm goin' tuh get me a job nursin' somebody's cows and try to mend my sinful ways."

"I'm going to Morling too," Wade explained. "Had an uncle out there who died and left me his place. I might be able to use you."

"An uncle? Why yuh must be old Bart Mavity's nephew," the cowboy ruminated.

"Did you know Bart?" Wade inquired. "I used to live in Morling myself. Bart raised me till I was about twelve then sent me back East to school. I've been away ever since."

"Any hombre that ever rode the Frying Flats knew Bart Mavity," Buck replied. "I've seen him lots of times but I guess nobody knew him right well. A very keep-to-hisself sort of gent was Bart. Kind of hermit, yuh might say. I hadn't heard he cashed in his chips. Sick long?"

"I don't know," Wade confessed. "I got a wire saying, 'Bart passed away—your presence as sole heir required.' It was signed by Phineas Lennox."

"That's Fin Lennox, the lawyer," Buck told him. "A right smart law-wrangler, too. Remember much about Morling?"

"Sure. A counterpart of the last ten towns this train's passed through."

"Peaceful, yuh mean?" Buck asked. "Yuh're wrong. She used to be plumb peaceable but I'm hearin' she's changed some in the last three—four months. The country thereabouts has busted out with a regular epidemic of rustling and they tell me they's some plumb tough jaspers hangin' around that town. She's a town full o' trouble, pardner.

If yuh own the Mavity spread yuh'll likely get yore share of it."

"I won't be staying," Wade said. "When I wind up this estate business I'll hop the first train. While I'm in Morling I'll keep my ears pinned back. Tell me more about Bart. You know, I only wrote him about a dozen times after I left. I'm ashamed. Bart Mavity was father, mother, teacher and family to me."

BUCK tried vainly to stretch his long legs. "Yore uncle didn't make close friends," he said, then hastily supplemented the remark. "Don't get me wrong, pardner—everybody liked him but Bart he sorta stuck close to hisself, stayed home and read books and let the rest of the world lope on. I was in his shack just once, and what do yuh think covered every wall? Books! The place was crawlin' with books!"

"Bart gave me my early schooling," Wade said. "He was better educated than any man I ever knew. He sent me away for my later schooling and afterwards I got a job on a newspaper."

He relaxed against the cushion in silence then. The conversation with Buck had carried him back into the past and, in memory's eye, he could see Bart's run-down spread and the little tar-papered book-filled shack that was the world to the scholarly recluse. And he saw Bart as Bart had been in those bygone days of ten years before.

It occurred to Wade that he resembled Bart greatly since coming to manhood. Bart had been six foot with the same broad shoulders and slender hips, the same laughing blue eyes and brown hair. His uncle was a younger brother of Wade's father and Bart couldn't have been much over fifty at death. Bart had adopted Wade in the young man's infancy when Wade's parents had died in a fire-swept ranch-house. Wade's earliest recollection of his uncle was of a very oldish-young man who preferred to spend his time with the printed page, leaving the work of his spread to a couple of cowhands he'd employed then.

Buck broke into his reverie. "He was a grand jasper," he eulogized. "The right sort of folks will welcome yuh to Morling."

As they talked the train had drawn nearer to the mountains. Ahead was a little town almost sheltered in the shadow of the Sawtooths.

"Pass Junction, if yuh don't recall," Buck said. "We unloads ourselves from this cast-iron cayuse here and goes through the pass to Morling."

Wade remembered. The railroad skirted the edge of the hills, depositing passengers at Pass Junction. Just across the mountains was Morling, the center of the sun-baked circular country cut off by the Sawtooths. Transportation had to be hired to carry them through the pass to their journey's end.

Buck arranged for that. There was a livery stable in Pass Junction where the cowboy soon hired a buckboard and a team of bays. The two loaded their luggage into the wagon and, with Buck at the reins, turned their backs on the huddle of buildings and drove along the make-shift road into the hills.

Wade was delighted. The coulees and ravines that turned themselves into lofty canyon walls were as food and drink to him. He thought he'd forgotten the magical beauty of this free, wild country but now, as the smell of pine and fir filled his nostrils and the rugged challenge of canyon and cliff met his eyes, he realized that he'd longed through the years to return here. Buck kept silent, apparently sensing his companion's communion with himself.

The trip was all too short for Wade. Once through the pass another panor-

ama of rangeland stretched before them until the mountains that walled in the other side of the Flats shut off the far horizon. Before he knew it Morling sprawled across the plain just a few miles ahead like a sunstricken drunkard.

Wade eyed the place eagerly as they approached. Buck had called it Trouble Town but the name seemed a wild exaggeration for Morling looked as peaceful as of old. The same single dust-choked street divided the same two rows of familiar buildings. Sun and blizzard and chinook winds of a decade had made the habitations more ramshackle than in the old days. Otherwise it was the Morling of Wade's boyhood.

The sun dipped toward the western peaks. Now was the time of day when the street was almost deserted, that lonely hour between the sluggish activity of afternoon and the hell-roaring night life of the town. Buck pulled the team up before a livery stable, a subsidiary of the one in Pass Junction, and surrendered the bays to a sleepy-eyed boy. They unloaded the luggage from the buckboard and set it up beside the entrance.

"Welcome tuh Morling," the cowboy thundered. "I will conduct yuh to the Only Chance Saloon where we will commemorate this occasion."

"A good idea," Wade agreed, recalling the spacious coolness of the Only Chance.

BUCK led the way down the street and through the batwing doors of the saloon. Wade noticed there were only two horses hitched to the rack. Then the smell of sawdust, mingled with that sour odor that clings forever to saloons, met him and he was inside. The semi-gloom almost blinded him but as they made their way to the bar Wade saw two men, the only other patrons. Both were strangers to Wade and Buck's talk on the train came back to him. These must be some of the sinister men who had been so recently attracted to Morling and whose coming had heralded an outburst of lawlessness.

One was a little fellow, scant five-foot-four and weighing no more than a hundred pounds. He was garbed as befitted the section but there was something about him that didn't belong. He was not an Easterner; neither was he a part of this cow-country.

His companion was in direct contrast to him—not in height, for the second man was no more than five-foot-eight but he was built like a blacksmith and arm muscles bulged his coat sleeves. A somber, dark face was accentuated by a black, drooping, tobacco-stained moustache. It was plain that he'd been drinking also but, compared to the little fellow, the dark man was sober.

The smaller fellow downed a drink and turned belligerently upon his companion. To Wade it was obvious that liquor had given the runt the courage to commence an argument he would have left unspoken under other conditions.

"Metcalfe, I'm quitting," he announced.

The bigger man scowled. "Shut yore face," he ordered.

"I'm quitting," the other insisted. "I'm telling you for the last time, Black-Mask is around here and when that hombre shows up, I move."

Metcalfe grasped the other roughly and raised a ponderous fist. "I'll give it to yuh if yuh don't keep quiet," he warned. "Yuh talk like a damn woman."

"Listen, Steve," the little man cut in. "I got places to go. I'm quittin' and going."

"Yuh don't vamoose till we say so," Metcalfe snapped. "If the Big Boss—"

He quieted abruptly as though realizing that he, himself, had spoken too much. Shooting a swift, suspicious glance at Wade and Buck, he swung back to his companion.

"We're gettin' out o' here, Shaw."

"I ain't goin'," Shaw shouted. "I'm leaving Morling tonight. To hell with the Big Boss. I'm thinking about my own carcass."

The hot blood of unrestrained anger blackened Metcalfe's face. Swinging an arm, he landed a vicious blow in Shaw's face. With the little man crumpling to the floor, his features blood-masked, Metcalfe towered over him.

"Maybe that'll shut yore trap," he snarled and planted a boot in the fallen man's ribs. "Yuh yellow-bellied rat."

Wade and Buck had watched the entire tableau; the coyboy with thumbs hooked nonchalantly in his belt, Wade with elbows on the bar. With that first blow Wade stiffened instinctively and almost started forward but Buck restrained him with a gesture. When the cowardly kick followed, Wade stepped toward Metcalfe, jarred the big man roughly with his hand.

"Lay off," Wade advised.

Metcalfe glared at the interferer in new anger. "Who the hell says so?" he demanded and launched a blow.

Steve Metcalfe was a fighting man. He had proved it in a score of roustabout battles that had established a reputation for him from the Marias to the Salmon River country in Idaho. His had been the school of fisticuffs where give and take is the technique. Consequently he received the surprise of his life when his sledge-hammer blow whistled through air as Wade effortlessly ducked aside.

METCALFE was astonished but his astonishment was short-lived. In another moment a fist came from nowhere, connected with his chin. It lifted him into the air and back against the bar. The bar-tender had instinctively ducked when Metcalfe had uttered his first challenge and there was nothing to stop the big man. Backwards over the polished mahogany he went to disappear amid a crash of glassware. Buck peered after him.

"Colder'n the mornin' after a blizzard," he whistled.

Wade blew upon bleeding knuckles. Buck grasped him by an elbow, started toward the door.

"Let's vamoose," he muttered.

"What's the hurry?" Wade demanded. "Maybe that big moose will want some more when he comes around."

"That's the trouble!" Buck ejaculated. "I happen to know the jasper yuh just sang the lullaby to. He's Steve Metcalfe and he's a bad hombre. This town's probably full of his men and yuh'll have the bunch of them on yore trail inside of an hour!"

CHAPTER III

The Rider From Yesterday

IT WAS characteristic of Wade Mavity that he felt little concern over the threatened danger that excited Buck Callahan. Rather, Wade was curious. In following his profession he had developed to a high degree that factor known as a "nose for news." Now, with Buck steering him rapidly down the street, Wade's anger, inspired by the brutal bullying of Shaw, died away and in its place came a great yearning to know what Shaw had been talking about.

"Buck, who the devil is Black-

Mask?" he demanded.

The puncher eyed him in astonishment. "Pardner, yuh mean to tell me yuh was reared around Morling and yuh never heard tell of Black-Mask?"

Wade puckered his brow. "Not that I remember."

"I shore can't help yuh much, then," Buck said with a shrug. He eyed the doorway of the Only Chance, some hundred yards behind them. "Seems like this Black-Mask was a combination outlaw and justice rider. Must o' been about the time I rode into this mortal coil, so's to speak, that he was burnin' leather."

Now Wade's curiosity was completely aroused. He intended to return East soon. This little town with its memories of yesteryear had awakened something akin to homesickness but that, he decided, was only the sentimentality that touches all men when they view the place of their birth. Still, he could learn all there was to discover about this Black-Mask before he left. The very name smacked of mystery and Wade recognized material for a newspaper feature story.

"Is there a newspaper in this town?" he asked. "There didn't use to be."

Buck gazed at him in slack-jawed amazement, then jerked a thumb toward a one-story frame building across the street. "There's the *Morling Clarion*," he said. "But we ain't stoppin' there."

Wade grinned. "You're a good scout, Buck. But you're excited over nothing. If this fellow Metcalfe goes on the warpath, he may figure we left town in a hurry. Personally, I think he'll cool off and wait his chance to crack back at me. Anyway, I want to have a chat with the editor of this town's paper and I have to see Lennox, the lawyer, before nightfall. I'm as safe in Morling as anywhere. Supposing you take my grip over to the Fairview House and I'll see you there later."

"Yuh're pro of this spread," Buck decided with a grimace. "Run along but remember to keep yore ears pinned back."

Wade smiled as he watched the lanky cowboy, so awkward afoot, as Buck lurched down the street toward the hotel, a grip in each hand. Then Wade stirred the ankle-deep dust toward the newspaper office.

If Wade Mavity could have known the important part the little stand of the *Morling Clarion* was to play in his life in the days to come, he might have looked it over more carefully. As it was, he only vaguely noticed a little building with a large bay window, too dirty to permit more than a hazy conception of the interior. A legend, sad sample of the sign-painter's craft, stretched across the glass to identify the place.

Stepping through the doorway, his eyes inventoried an ink-stained desk, several filing cases, a pot-bellied stove which served as a waste-paper receptacle at this season, and grimy walls covered with various types of printed matter. Seated in a sagging swivel chair was a thin, wiry man with a lean, hawk-like face beneath a mane of neutral colored hair. His feet rested on a battered cuspidor.

"Good afternoon," Wade greeted him. "You the editor?"

The hawk-faced man spat dexterously between his legs. "Editor, printer, circulation-manager, advertising solicitor and swamper," he said, "when the regular swamper is drunk—which he mostly is."

Wade extended a hand. "I'm Wade Mavity," he said and named his Chicago newspaper.

THE editor blinked. "Lawson Kemp," he identified himself and shuffled over to take Wade's hand. "Glad to know you."

"I'm stopping in Morling for a few days," Wade explained. "I want some information and I think you're the man who can give it to me."

Kemp shot a suspicious glance toward him. "You must be Bart Mavity's nephew," the editor observed. "There ain't much I can tell you about him."

"That isn't what I'm after," Wade said. "I want some material for a feature."

Kemp relaxed. He indicated the swivel chair with a gesture, seated himself on the edge of the desk. "What can I do for you?" he asked.

"I've heard the section has some sort of legendary figure known as Black-Mask," Wade told him. "I want to write him up."

Again that glance of suspicion bridged the space between them until Kemp shifted his gaze and spoke. "Would make likely copy. Black-Mask was a jasper who rode in these parts over twenty years ago."

"Who was he?" Wade asked. "What did he look like? What was his purpose?"

Kemp raised a hand. "One at a time, feller," he protested. "Nobody knows who he was. Always wore a black mask, black sombrero, black chaps, black everything—includin' his horse. Purpose? Wa-al, he cleaned up a batch of rustlers that was making the sheriff and all the ranchers hereabouts look kind of sick—and he cleaned them jaspers practically single-handed. After that he just dissolved into the breeze and ain't been seen since."

Wade whistled. Scant wonder that little Shaw, apparently a member of these present-day rustlers, was anxious to leave the country if this night-riding Nemesis was again in the saddle. This was interesting. "Over twenty years ago," he murmured. "I must have been just learning to walk."

"That's right," Kemp agreed. "I did hear that Mavity's nephew used to live here. I guess you'd have been pretty young when Black-Mask rode. I was working on the range then, 'fore I learned the printer's trade down in Denver."

"Tell me more about this fellow," Wade insisted. "You say he was never seen after he finished his job?"

"Nary hide nor hair," Kemp replied. "He fought it out with Dan Dorgan here on the street and after he'd dusted Dorgan the townspeople grabbed the rustler and clapped him in jail. Black-Mask rode out of town with everybody cheering him like he was a king and he was never seen afterwards."

"Dan Dorgan? Who was he?"

"You never heard of Trigger Dan Dorgan?" Kemp demanded incredulously. "But of course not. I'd forgot you was just a yearling then. Trigger Dan was the head of the rustlers that was raising all the hell hereabouts. Fastest gunman that ever hit Montana. He was only a kid then but he'd shot a reputation from Sonora to the Yukon. They said his draw couldn't be beat but Black-Mask beat him and the old-timers still talk about that fight. Seems like Dorgan and Black-Mask tangled a good many times when Black-Mask was teaching them hombres a little outlaw-law. Dorgan got hankering to know just how good Black-Mask really was and challenged him to come to Morling for a showdown. It was a loco move on Dorgan's part since the whole damn town was gunning for him. Black-Mask had already proved Dorgan was head of the rustlers."

"This Dorgan must have been quite a man, too!"

"I reckon," Kemp agreed. "Dorgan was one of those gents who'd just as soon die as live thinking maybe some other jasper could beat him on the draw. They'd been some insinuations spread around the Flats and Dorgan

ups and asks Black-Mask to meet him in front of plenty of witnesses. Naturally the crowd held back to see the fight but when Dorgan was down they darn soon took advantage of the fact. Dorgan had guts but he was plumb loco just the same."

"What happened to him?" Wade asked.

"Prison," Kemp replied. "I reckon they just about had everything on the calendar ag'in him. I think the combined sentences must 'a' run a couple thousand years. Anyway they sent him down to Deer Lodge and that was the end of the rustling—and likewise the end of Black-Mask."

WADE nodded. Through their conversation he'd sensed that Kemp was holding something back. There was the ring of truth in what had been said but Wade felt that the Editor knew more about his subject than he'd told. Kemp appeared too anxious to convey the impression that the entire affair belonged to the past. Wade, eyeing him closely, framed another question.

"From what I've heard about conditions around here, I imagine this Black-Mask could find his old job open again. What do you think?"

Kemp merely shrugged. "There was twenty years of peace on the Frying Flats after Black-Mask cleaned up Dorgan and his crew," he said. "Now hell's popping around here again and this new bunch is plenty salty. The country'll be fair ruined pretty quick. Seems like maybe the ranchers could use Black-Mask again. Once that jasper had proved which side he was riding on, the cattlemen followed his lead pronto. When he downed Trigger Dan he made hisself a reputation that will last until the hills fold up. Varmints like Steve Metcalfe didn't walk the town like they owned it in them days."

Wade swept his eyes over the little room again and smelled the inky odor that identified the place. "Ought to be a nice spot for a crusading editor," he drawled. "You should be able to do a little action-stirring yourself, Kemp."

"To hell with it," Lawson Kemp snapped and his face twisted with sudden passion. "I ain't asking for a pine coffin which means I ain't looking for trouble with the crowd that's working this section."

Wade arched his eyebrows. Whatever Lawson Kemp might know, the man clearly intended to keep himself apart from the warring factions. To Wade, trained to believe in the press as a weapon, this was unbelievable. He gazed at Kemp with something in his eye that approached contempt.

"You're a newspaper man, aren't you?" he demanded. "Public welfare's part of your job."

"Is it?" Kemp retorted. "Your uncle was as interested in public welfare as anyone—when he pulled his nose out of a book long enough to realize there was a public. What did it ever get him?"

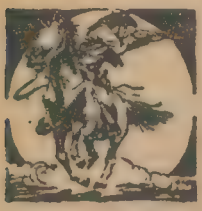
But Wade, remembering another name he'd heard at the Only Chance, ignored the question. "Ever hear of a fellow called the 'Big Boss?'" he asked abruptly.

Kemp started visibly. Then he seemed to recoil, like an elongated lobster crawling into its shell. His eyes narrowed.

"No!" he shouted. "Another man asked me that same question. Your uncle Bart! He was always curious about the Big Boss and I gave him the same answer I just gave you. Twenty-four hours later he was found dead. Keep that in mind. And when you see Fin Lennox, who's probably handling the estate, ask him a question—ask him if Bart Mavity's death was accidental!"

CHAPTER IV

Dangerous Heritage



MANY thoughts had crowded Wade Mavity since the moment, some ten days past, when he had been handed Lennox's telegram. The thought that Bart might have died a violent death was not one of them. In his mind, Bart Mavity was peacefully dead and quietly buried and this trip was the routine matter of settling the estate.

Thus there was a heavy moment of silence as the import of Kemp's words struck home. Then Wade realized he must be glaring wildly for Kemp shrank back against the pigeon-holes of his desk as though fearful that Wade would leap at him.

"Let's get each other straight," Wade gritted. "I dropped in for data on this Black-Mask. You gave me the answers and I'm much obliged. I'm sorry I ruffled your tail-feathers with my remarks about a crusading editor because it's none of my damn business how you run your paper. Let that pass. What I do want to know is this—just what did you mean by that remark about Bart's death?"

Kemp cringed, then bristled. "I didn't mean nothing," he protested. "You riled me. I know I haven't got the guts to fight the crowd hereabouts and when you hit me in a tender spot I kinda wanted to hit back."

"Just the same, you insinuated that Bart didn't die accidentally. I want to know all there is to know about it."

"Wa-al, it was kind of suspicious," Kemp remonstrated. "According to whispers about town, the rustlers call their leader the Big Boss. I reckon there's quite a few people curious about that hombre but it seems mighty queer when your uncle asks about him one day and that night his shack gets dynamited with him in it."

"*Dynamited!*" Panic gripped Wade. "Is that how he died?"

"Yep. Roused the whole town up. We heard the explosion about eleven—twelve o'clock. When a few gents galloped out to Bart's spread there wasn't nothing left but kindling wood and a big hole where his shack used to be. We buried Bart next day. That's all I know. That's all anybody knows."

A thousand thoughts whirled through Wade's head. Dynamited in the middle of the night! Had Bart made himself a target for outlaw wrath? It just didn't fit. Wade couldn't picture Bart even being aware of the existence of rustlers. And he'd met two men this day who described his uncle as an elderly counterpart of the scholarly Bart whom Wade remembered.

Jerking himself together with an effort, he turned on Kemp. "Where do I find Phineas Lennox?" he asked.

The editor gestured. Across the street was one of the few two-story buildings Morling boasted. The ground floor was devoted to a hardware store, an undertaker's establishment and a mercantile store. Above were the offices of the professional men of the community. Two windows bore the name of Phineas Lennox, Attorney at Law.

Wade grinned wryly. "Thanks, Kemp," he said. "I hope we meet again before I leave."

The editor mumbled something and Wade strode through the door and across the street. He found a stairs, a creaking affair that led to the upper floor of the big building where a hallway ran the length of the place. Doors gave off on either side and one of these was the entrance to the attorney's office. It was hardly probable that Len-

nox would be in at this hour for the sun was balanced on the peak of a western mountain and the street was completely deserted. Yet when Wade drummed knuckles upon the door, a voice invited him inside.

Wade opened the door. Office and ante-room were combined for Phineas Lennox. Just inside, a number of chairs were placed for waiting clients and a low railing divided this section of the room from the office proper. Behind this barrier stood a littered desk flooded by the glow of an overhanging kerosene lamp that had just been lighted. The lamp cast dancing shadows on a framed portrait of Abraham Lincoln and a time-yellowed law certificate which adorned the wall. Another door at the rear of the room led to a smaller sanctum where the attorney retired with clients whose business was for private ears. Phineas Lennox sat at his desk.

Wade's childhood recollections of Lennox were nebulous but he stepped forward eagerly to meet him for this was Bart's lawyer and probably the only man who had really known the recluse. Here was the man who could sustain or dispel the shadows of suspicion that had haunted Wade since Kemp had made his insinuation.

THOUGH seated, it was apparent that Lennox was a tall man and splendidly proportioned. His clean-shaven face was well-formed, almost the face of an aesthetic except that the lips were a trifle too thin. In the lamp light his silver hair gleamed and shimmered in waves as it curled back from his forehead to nestle in a mass at the nape of his neck, giving him a regal, leonine appearance. A pair of vigorous, youthful eyes, wide-set and penetrating belied his years and compelled Wade's attention as he studied the man.

"I'm Wade Mavity," he said.

Phineas Lennox rose from his chair and gravely extended his hand. "I'm proud to know you, my boy," he said.

They gripped hands across the desk for a long moment. Lennox skirted his deck and, placing his hands on Wade's shoulders, gazed at him.

"Bart Mavity's nephew," he murmured. "Why son, you're the picture of Bart twenty years ago. Welcome to Morling."

"Thanks," Wade returned heartily and accepted a proffered chair. Lennox seated himself close by, arms folded.

"You must have come directly after receiving my wire. I hardly expected you so soon. Tell me, my boy, what have you done in the years since you left our town? I saw Bart so seldom that I had only the barest accounts of you."

Wade told him, sketching the passing years with brief strokes. Lennox listened in silence, nodding approvingly. Wade brought events up to date by speaking of his meeting with Buck Callahan, his fight with Metcalfe and, finally, his conversation with Kemp. The lawyer sighed wearily.

"I am afraid this section is in the grip of forces that are apt to bring disaster," he agreed. "Your friend Callahan chose a perfect name when he called Morling 'Trouble Town.'"

"That's not the point as far as I'm concerned," Wade countered. "I'm not afraid of Steve Metcalfe and I don't intend to be in town long. What interests me is this: *was* Bart's death accidental."

"It must have been, Wade," the lawyer replied. "I can't imagine why your uncle had dynamite in his shack although there could be countless explanations. The fact that it exploded to kill him is to be deeply regretted but I cannot believe that it was other than an accident."

"But Kemp said uncle was nosing around about some kind of a mystery man called the 'Big Boss,'" Wade insisted. "This fellow seems to be the head of the outlaws around here. Do you suppose it is possible he resented Bart's curiosity and killed him to stop his questions?"

"No, son, that isn't plausible," the lawyer argued. "Several of us have heard of this Big Boss and it's only natural that people are curious as to his identity. Questions wouldn't worry the rustlers."

"It seems darn queer just the same."

Again Lennox placed his hands on Wade's shoulders. "I know how you feel, boy," he said softly. "But I knew Bart Mavity for over thirty years and I'm positive no one wished him harm. He was the most peace-loving man that ever lived and he minded his own business strictly. He was respected for his learning, son, highly respected. They used to call upon him to give speeches on Fourth-of-Julys and such. Bart Mavity never owned a gun and that, in itself, points to a rare philosophy in this country. He had no enemy and no faculty for making an enemy. Morling has mourned his passing, my boy, but rest assured, his death was accidental. It couldn't have been otherwise."

Wade choked and words came to him haltingly. "He was great, I know," he said simply. "That's why I couldn't rest if I thought he'd been deliberately killed."

As though sensing Wade's feelings, the lawyer turned silently away and entered the other office. Returning a few minutes later, he carried a large wooden box which he placed near Wade.

"Bart brought this to me over a month ago," Lennox explained. "He said that if anything ever happened to him, I should wire you and turn it over to you. It's your heritage, boy. In it, Bart told me, is the deed to his ranch and some personal things of his that he wanted you to have."

WADE gazed at the box, a makeshift thing, then back to the lawyer and his eyes blazed with sudden suspicion.

"Sounds like he expected to die when he brought this to you!"

Lennox smiled and shook his head. "I was afraid you'd think that," he said. "Forget it. Dozens of clients have come to me through the years to settle their affairs, insisting their days were numbered. Most of them will outlive both of us. Bart was just taking a natural, ordinary precaution."

Wade eyed the box again. He struggled to throttle the feeling that had continued to grip him since Kemp had first planted the seed of suspicion. Lennox had proved it was ridiculous to believe Bart had come to a violent end. But the thought, phoenix-like, died only to be born again.

"Run along to your hotel," Lennox counseled him. "You're tired from your trip. Sleep over your talk and you'll agree that I'm right. Or, better still, open the box. Who knows, perhaps there will be a message from Bart that may explain his reason for leaving it with me."

The lawyer's logic was sound. Wade did feel tired and, after promising to see Lennox again, he wished him good night and left the office almost abruptly. He wanted to get to his hotel to think, to be alone, to open this box that was his legacy from Bart.

When he made his way down the creaking stairs, the town was beginning to awaken to its night life as riders galloped in from the surrounding ranches to gather at the Only Chance and similar spots. No one paid the least attention to Wade and he soon

reached the Fairview House. True to orders, Buck had reserved a room but the lanky cowboy was nowhere about. A sleepy-looking clerk led Wade to the room.

Inside, Wade drew the shades and lighted the kerosene lamp at the bedside. Placing the wooden box upon a chair, he hurried down to the clerk's desk and borrowed a claw hammer. The cover of the box protested loudly as he pulled the tightly-nailed boards loose, fumbling in curiosity-prompted haste. As he ripped the last board away he suddenly smiled to himself. The box probably contained books! Foolish not to have thought of it before. The thing was certainly heavy enough and it would have been entirely characteristic of the scholarly Bart to leave the pick of his prize volumes to his only heir.

Paper packing concealed the contents. Wade tore it away to reveal what lay beneath. For a moment he peered into the box in almost stupid bewilderment. Then, although his eyes had never rested upon them before, he recognized the articles that lay there. Here was a black sombrero, folded black chaps and, in a corner, the black handles of six-guns peeped from two black holsters.

Realization dawned like the thrust of lightning across a storm-blackened sky and realization left Wade staring with unbelieving eyes. Yet here was truth undisputable. As though they were gifted with clamoring tongues, the sombrero, the six-guns, the entire regalia shouted that Bart Mavity, peace-loving Bart, had rode the justice trail as Black-Mask!

This, then, was Wade's heritage—to carry on in his uncle's place, to fight as Bart Mavity had fought, the unequal struggle of one lone rider against the lawless element and their mysterious Big Boss!

CHAPTER V

Killer in the Darkness

MANY minutes passed before Wade Mavity was able to completely accept the fact that had been thrust upon him. Bart Mavity had been Black-Mask! Then, as the incredible gradually became credible, a sudden fear gripped him and he began a hurried examination of the box. He was looking for the telltale marks of battering hammer or prying bar but none were there. The box hadn't been opened before this night. Bart had apparently delivered it at once into the safe keeping of Lennox and the box had remained in the lawyer's office until it was turned over to the new owner.

His investigation shifted the contents of the box so that the corner of an envelope showed itself beneath the clothing. Tearing it open, Wade emptied a sheaf of currency, a legal form and a bulky letter upon the bed. The money was thousand dollar bank-notes, twenty of them in all. Placing the currency in his bill-fold, Wade scanned the legal form, a deed in his name but as yet unrecorded, which gave him title to the Leaning Circle ranch. Turning to the letter, he saw that it contained many pages in the small, precise hand of his uncle. The date on the first page was some eight weeks past.

Wade propped himself against the window frame, his shadow a weird silhouette on the drawn shade, and began to read:

"My dear nephew," the letter said, **"as I pen these words I find myself torn between two emotions. I must smile as**

I picture your incredulity when you follow the amazing story I am about to unfold and, on the other hand, I find myself shuddering since perhaps you shall be reading this sooner than I anticipate. I am filled with grim foreboding for I know I walk through the valley of the shadow.

"And now you are filled with a burning curiosity as to the meaning of my words. Since the strange contents of the box has fired your imagination, so this equally strange beginning of my letter has added fuel to that fire. I beg that you bear with me, for to fully explain I must turn back time a long, long ways and begin, rightly, at the beginning."

Wade smiled wistfully. Bart, somewhere beyond, could not know that his nephew's curiosity had already prompted Wade to unearth a good part of the strange narrative that Bart believed would amaze him now. Wade hastily skimmed through the next several pages. They contained an account of Bart's early activities as Black-Mask which had climaxed on the day when Trigger Dan Dorgan had gone down before the justice-rider's triumphant gun.

"And now you are wondering," the letter continued, "why, my work completed, I did not unmask myself and taste the fruits of my hard-earned victory. My motive for remaining incognito is the one great truth you must know above all things. Had I accepted the golden crown of glory when the smoke of battle cleared away, I would also have been forced to accept the deadly crown of disaster. And why?

"In my teens I discovered, almost accidentally, that I was endowed with that certain coordination of mind, muscle and nerve that makes an exceptional gunman. This gift has been bestowed upon many men and some have earned deathless fame. But in the end most of them found a place in Boothill because of the very gift that made them great.

"Such a fate would have inevitably overtaken me, had I announced myself as the man who beat Trigger Dan.

"In the tragic career of Trigger Dan Dorgan we have a splendid example of the eventual finish of all who taste the gun. Dorgan was a superior gunman but, in the end, this ability was his downfall. Whoever has had a taste of the gun can never quite get that taste from their mouth. They are doomed to go through life shackled with an obsession—an over-mastering desire to know whether a famed opponent is in reality a better man.

"That is why Trigger Dan chose to challenge me to meet him before witnesses when he knew he was deliberately risking capture by the crowd. He had tasted the gun and it was better, by his reasoning, to take a chance and go to prison rather than to flee to safety when his rustling game was up, leaving behind him the possibility that Black-Mask *might* have been a better gunman than he. He satisfied himself by meeting me and, in consequence, languishes in prison, a fate far worse than death for such a man.

"Had I chosen to unmask, my career would have ended in like manner. My reputation was established when I bested Trigger Dan and that reputation has since spread. One by one, gunfighters far and near have heard of my exploits and one by one they have wondered if I were faster than they. Had they known my identity, they would have sought me out to learn my ability for themselves. From the day I publicly unmasked until the day I stood before a faster man and reached too late, I would never have known a moment's peace.

"It was much easier for Black-Mask to fade into the shadows and for peaceable Bart Mavity to resume his place among men. I have never regretted this choice.

"Now the call has come to don again the guns of Black-Mask, for I am sorely needed. I cannot say that I love the role I fear I must accept, for I am the sad combination of a man possessed with the ability to fight and a loathing for combat. Twenty years ago duty faced me and I elected to do my bit for this harassed section. Recently I have been faced with the same choice and again I have become Black-Mask.

"This time I fear the odds are too great. Years ago my foe was Trigger

Dan and his band of rustlers. The new faction is something greater and more sinister and they are headed by a man of insidious might, their unknown leader, the Big Boss. Unless they are stopped, this will be ruined, deserted country with the coming of winter. I have been unable to fathom the identity of their leader nor could I learn whether his purpose goes deeper than wholesale rustling. I do know that my curiosity has brought suspicion upon me and that suspicion is the shadow which prompts me to write this letter.

"Should anything happen to me, it is my hope that you will take my place. I believe that no man is better fitted than yourself for the role. One thing will be in your favor. No one has ever suspected me of being Black-Mask. I am certain of that. My danger lies in the fact that the Big Boss fears me as myself, fears that I may fathom his identity. Consequently if they succeed in eliminating me as Bart Mavity, you can still take my place as Black-Mask and the reputation I have established in that role will serve you for no one will know that another is substituting.

"If you accept this portion of your heritage and choose to wear my mask, you will find that outlaw and law will both be your foe. The greater part of my task when I rounded up Dorgan's crew was in convincing the ranchers that I was seeking to assist them for it is human to distrust a man who fears to show his face. Perhaps confidence will have to be re-established if Black-Mask rides again.

"Due north of the Leaning Circle ranch-house and back in the foothills is a little cabin hideaway which I have maintained for many years. This was the base of my operations in the old days. You will find it well provisioned for your needs. My horse pastures nearby.

"Perhaps your education will have taught you better ways of fighting and you will choose to carry on along different lines. This, too, I leave to your judgment.

"I have enclosed a sum of money and the deed to my ranch—the entire substance of my worldly goods. The balance of your inheritance is the garb of Black-Mask. If you choose to wear it, trust no one, for every man may be your enemy. You will taste, in time, of the diabolical cunning of the Big Boss who may be a stranger from afar and who also may be a man who sits at my right hand.

Do not consider it as a dead man's wish that you take my place. Perhaps your work is not here. Your heart will give you the answer. Should you ride a losing trail, death and danger will be your reward. If you win, your only triumph will be in the thought that you have aided a people in finding peace.

As I draw to the close of my letter, I find myself hoping fervently that you will never read it. Perhaps I shall triumph again and retrieve my box from Lennox's office, untouched. Then, one day in the years to come, I will sit by your side and tell you with my own lips this story I have unfolded in these pages. Who knows?

"I would like to linger longer over that last thought, drawing it out in my imagination and tasting the pleasantness of it. But, because I know that if it comes to pass that you read this letter I will be somewhere else beyond, I repeat—the choice is yours.

"Whatever your choosing, God bless you and keep you, my boy."

THE signature of Bart Mavity concluded the letter and for a long time Wade stared at it, his shadow motionless on the shade. Through the years he had looked up to his uncle, deeming Bart Mavity great in his own scholarly way. Now he knew that his kin had been far, far greater than he had ever realized, for peace-loving Bart had played a warrior's part, knowing there could be no tangible reward for his efforts.

Almost reverently, Wade placed the letter beside the lamp. One of the pages escaped him, drifted to the floor, and he stooped to retrieve it. That act saved his life. Glass showered about him as a gun roared somewhere outside. He felt the air-lash of a bullet as lead hummed over his head to bury itself in the far wall.

CHAPTER VI

Death Stacks the Deck

WADE MAVITY had known danger before in his varied life but this was the first time he had ever found himself dodging bullets. His reaction, therefore, was as instinctive as it was efficient. Dropping to the floor, he flattened out, and from this vantage point reached and extinguished the lamp. Prone, he waited for another bullet but the would-be assassin's gun was silent.

He'd made a perfect target as he'd stood silhouetted against the window shade, Wade realized. And the unseen marksman who'd lined gun-sights on that silhouette had meant business—deadly business. It was attempted murder and it had almost succeeded.

But why? Probing for an answer, Wade instantly thought of Steve Metcalfe. The man was undoubtedly capable of killing. If Metcalfe had ferreted out the name of the man who had bested him in the Only Chance, the big man might easily have strolled into the hotel, glanced at the register and noted the number of Wade's room. Then, if Metcalfe were familiar with the hotel, he could have picked a position where he could fire into that certain room. Wade, leaning against the window frame, had only heightened the opportunity.

Yet Wade wasn't satisfied with his own solution. Bart's letter, speaking of danger and death, was too fresh in his mind. Bart had died because of his curiosity. And since his arrival in Morling, Wade had shown curiosity too, asked questions about the Big Boss. Were sinister forces already moving, plotting, to blot him out for his interest in forbidden matters?

Still, this was only further conjecture. Wade knew a growing desire to do a little investigating. Besides, it wasn't to his liking to remain with his nose buried in the dusty, faded carpet waiting like a penned sheep for the slaughter. Keeping out of line with the window, he cautiously arose.

In a corner of the room was a clothes closet with a key protruding from its door. Wade took time to move Bart's box into the closet, along with the scattered sheets of the letter. Locking the door, he slipped the key into his pocket and hurried downstairs.

A dozen riders thundered down the street as he came to the boardwalk. Guns unsheathed, they sent orange flame stabbing at the sky and those shots were punctuated by boisterous shouts as the horsemen stampeded by. Wade grinned. Obviously it had been payday on some Frying Flats spread and pleasure-starved cowpokes had come to paint the town. Wade felt a sudden, forgotten kinship to those wild youngsters, then swift apprehension stabbed him. With the guns of pleasure turning the night into bedlam, the guns of murder might speak unnoticed before another dawn.

Shaking the thought aside, he skirted the building for his room was in the rear of the hotel. An alley ran behind the place but a high board fence flanked it and, once off the street, the way was blanketed in blackness. Scant chance of finding anyone in this gloom. Yet Wade proceeded, moving as silently as he could. He wished he'd left the lamp burning in his room in order to orient himself. The rear wall of the hotel was an unbroken blotch and he could only guess the approximate position the gunman must have taken.

The darkness was a disadvantage but it would also be a disadvantage to the gunman if he were still lurking about. That was Wade's grim reflec-

tion. Then all thought was forgotten as he collided with some vague shadow-shape in that tunnel of shadows.

It was no drunken wayfarer he'd met. The unseen man proved that by immediately throwing his arms about Wade, trying at the same time to trip him, hurl him to the ground. There was grim intent in the attack. Fighting desperately, Wade managed to break the clinch. Striking out with his left, he felt his fist brush a shoulder. He followed with his right, a smashing blow with dynamite behind it. Pure luck guided his fist. It was a blind man's blow but his knuckles thudded against a chin and he heard his assailant sprawl.

Panting, Wade knelt and pawed for the other's gun. He felt the outlines of a holster and the cold touch of a gun-butt met his fingers. Jerking the gun, Wade flung it aside. Then he groped for a match.

THE face that was revealed in the tiny blossoming flame was one he'd never seen before. The man was unconscious, a handsome fellow, smooth shaven and well groomed, a man of indefinite age. It was his garb rather than his face that chained Wade's attention. Polished boots, faultless riding breeches and a white silk shirt, open at the throat, clothed the man. This was Eastern apparel, outlandish as yet in the range country.

A frown wedging his brows, Wade stared. "A new piece for the puzzle," he ruminated. "Now, how the devil do you fit in?"

The match burned to his fingertips and he blew it out. He scarcely knew what his next move was going to be but common sense dictated that this was a matter for the law. A jail cell was the place for a man who tried his hand at murder. Yet Wade wished there was some other course. There were a lot of things he wanted to know and this unconscious man might have most of the answers.

Reluctantly, he arose. He'd have to go for the sheriff. He hesitated to leave his unconscious prisoner but he had no means of tying the man unless he used a necktie for the purpose. Striking another match, he examined the fellow again. That man was going to be unconscious for a long time from the look of him. Turning, Wade groped his way out of the alley and back to the street. Almost the first person he saw was lanky Buck Callahan, swinging toward the hotel.

"You're a God-send," Wade jerked before the cowboy's greeting grin had faded. "Hike around the corner and up the alley. You'll find a gent laid out on the ground. Sit on him if you have to—but keep him there till I get back. I'm going to the sheriff's office. Now don't ask questions—there isn't time. Do as I say, pard."

With the astonished Buck hurrying into the shadows, Wade swung up the street again but he hadn't gone ten paces before he changed his plans. Buck would see that the man in the alley didn't get away. Thus there wasn't such an urgent need to hurry to the sheriff. Wade was going to call on somebody else for Wade wanted to dig into this affair that had been forced upon him. Lawson Kemp was the man to see.

Wade had spoken to five people since his arrival in Morling—therefore only five people could possibly know of his interest in the Big Boss. Steve Metcalfe and the Only Chance barkeep had to be discounted. He could see no link between the battle in the saloon and the battle in the alley. Buck Callahan and Phineas Lennox had to be discounted too. Each was equally above suspicion. The fifth man was Lawson Kemp of the suspicious attitude and

the evasive hints. Kemp had known that Bart Mavity was murdered. Kemp, then, might know why a smooth-faced stranger had tried to murder Wade Mavity.

In any case Wade was going to force Kemp to answer a few questions before the law was called into the matter. Possibly the editor had innocently spoken of Wade's visit to other parties—possibly the man had passed the news along with malicious intent. Either way, the result had been the same.

So Wade headed, once again, for the one-story frame building that housed the *Morling Clarion*. He had almost reached the place when boots thundered behind him and he spun to find Buck Callahan panting in pursuit.

"He's gone," Buck gasped. "There's no gent in that alley."

Wade stared. "Gone!" he echoed. "He can't be. Not this quickly . . ."

THE fellow must have been playing possum, he realized. The unconsciousness had been feigned, a ruse to throw Wade off guard. Wade shrugged. He'd been fooled, fooled completely, but there was nothing he could do about it now.

"Too bad," he reflected. "Come along, Buck. You've got questions sticking out of your ears but you'll get most of the answers when I speak a piece to Mr. Lawson Kemp."

The interior of Kemp's office was dark, the big bay window reflecting the light that splashed from a saloon across the street. The place would be locked, of course. Yet when Wade tried the door, it gave beneath his hand. Possibly Kemp was in a print shop behind the place, he decided, or perhaps the man's living quarters were in the building.

The office was exactly as he'd left it an hour or two before. The half-light made the only difference, for the pot-bellied stove loomed like some squatting ogre and the printed matter glimmered faintly from the walls. The eternal inky odor still pervaded the air. Completing the scene, Lawson Kemp was slouched in the swivel chair before the desk.

Wade's first thought was that the man had dozed off for Kemp's chin sagged upon his breast. Crossing the room, Wade reached to shake the editor. It was then Wade understood. He had come to force certain truths from Lawson Kemp, to take cards in a grim game. But death had come before him to stack the deck. Lawson Kemp was dead; a dark blotch on his shirt-front betraying the manner of his passing.

CHAPTER VII

JUDY

SHERIFF VIC BOHLER looked like anything under the sun but the lawman of a trouble-ridden town. His was a moon-like face, round and benign. As though to carry out a scheme of contours, his body was also round, a paunchy affair perched upon short, stocky legs. His eyes were small and hinted of shrewdness but this only sign of hidden intelligence was offset by a grin as vacuous as it was perpetual. Wade Mavity was far from impressed by the sheriff of Morling at their first meeting.

It was Buck who fetched the lawman to the office of the *Morling Clarion* while Wade waited alone in the darkness with the remains of Lawson Kemp. The editor had been killed by a bullet fired at close range. This much Wade

discovered before Buck's return with the law. Wade wasted no words after introductions were made. He quickly told of his original visit to Kemp, the attempt at assassination that had again brought him to Kemp's office and the discovery he and Buck had made. Vic Bohler heard him out in silence.

"This gent in riding breeches," Bohler finally said, his voice soft and contented. "You've got him all wrong. He ain't the bushwhackin' kind."

"You know him?" Wade demanded eagerly. "What in blazes was he doing in the alley after the shooting then?"

"Now don't you get het up about it, son," the sheriff said. "I'll ask him myself, soon as he shows up in Morling again."

"But who is he? What's his name?" Wade insisted.

"Never you mind," Bohler countered in his mild manner. "I'm the gent that asks the questions hereabouts. Now you and your pard run along and get yourself some sleep."

Wade had anticipated hours of investigation in which he and Buck, as key witnesses, would have an active part. He stared incredulously. "You mean you don't need us any more?" he gasped. "Aren't you going to dig out the truth about all this?"

"Maybe so," Bohler replied with a yawn. "Diggin' for truth is generally a waste of time and only gets a gent tangled in his own twine. Sometimes if he just sits, the truth comes to him. Reckon tryin' to find the gent that salivated Lawson and tried to salivate you would be sorta like huntin' for a needle in a haystack. Seems we'll have to call it 'death at the hands of parties unknown' for a spell."

Wade glared. He might have said a lot of things but he held his tongue. Words wouldn't jar Vic Bohler. The passive attitude of the lawman indicated one of two things; either Bohler was a hopeless fool or he was in the pay of the evil forces that throttled the range. In either case it was useless to rebuke the man. So, clamping his jaw angrily, Wade strode from the office, Buck at his heels.

"I wouldn't go judgin' Vic Bohler quick like," Buck said as they headed for the hotel. "Most o' the time he acts like he's walkin' in his sleep so's to speak. But he's no fool."

"Maybe not," Wade snapped. "But I've seen dog-catchers that had more interest in their work."

But back at the hotel, Wade dismissed Vic Bohler from his mind. Alone in his room, his first move was to glance into the clothes closet where he found Bart's box exactly as he'd left it. He fingered Bart's letter for a long time, then finally burnt it in a spitoon. That, he reflected, was the best way to keep it out of the wrong hands.

He thought of the letter when he tumbled into bed. In the stress of events since he'd first read it, he hadn't had time to consider the strange heritage Bart had left him. Now he was squarely faced with the issue. Did he want to be Black-Mask?

It wasn't a problem to be decided in a minute. Bart had made his own choice unhesitantly because Bart Mavity had wanted to champion his neighbors. Both in the past and recently his uncle had been motivated by the same reason. Yet the troubles of the people of the Frying Flats were alien to Wade, as alien as the people were themselves.

It wasn't callous indifference to his uncle's wish that made Wade hesitate. Rather, he was trying to take an honest view of the matter. Bart, he knew, would have expected him to. The very wording of the letter had indicated that the acceptance of Black-Mask's role was entirely up to Wade.

BART had been murdered. Wade couldn't ignore that, nor could he forget that an attempt had been made on his own life. The issue had taken on personal aspects that had to be weighed in the balance. And those aspects rankled Wade for they meant that if he left for Chicago he would be turning his back on trouble—running. He drifted to sleep without reaching a decision and he was just as undecided when he sauntered down stairs next morning in search of breakfast.

He found Buck in the dining room adjacent to the hotel lobby. The lean cowboy was the lone occupant of a spacious table and Wade slipped into a vacant chair.

"Mornin'," Buck muttered as audibly as a mouthful of food would permit. "I've got some news for yuh."

"Steve Metcalfe?"

Buck nodded. "Seems like Metcalfe and Shaw moved out of town in a helluva hurry last night," he explained. "The barkeep tells me Steve was wild when he finally woke up and was goin' gunnin' for yuh pronto. A spell afterwards, a half-dozen of that crew burned leather out o' here."

"Suppose he figured I'd left town and went looking for me?"

"Maybe so. Maybe so." But Buck shook his head in doubt. "Likely they got an order from that Big Boss of theirs. Somebody'll be countin' their cows this mornin' and wondering what happened to the primest half o' the herd."

Wade, drumming his fingers upon the table-top, digested the information for what it was worth—which was exactly nothing. He abruptly changed the subject.

"How would you like to run the Leaning Circle?" he asked.

Buck gazed at him open-mouthed. "Be yore range boss, yuh mean?"

"Maybe be the head boss. You see, my inheritance turned out to be the Mavity spread and some cash. I'm willing to pour some of the money into the ranch as I imagine it's pretty well run down. We'll be partners. You handle the ranch and make it pay and I'll take care of you till it does. Then we'll work out some kind of a divvy arrangement."

Buck laid aside his knife. "Pardner," he said. "I cottoned to yuh from the first. I guess yuh must 'a' sized me up O.K., too, for yuh wouldn't be makin' me an offer like yuh are. Shucks, I'm just a forty-a-month-and-chow cowpoke yuh never saw before yesterday."

Wade grinned. "I'm thinking you'll do to ride the river with."

"Yuh've got a pardner." Buck rose and extended his hand. "Yuh stayin' in the section?"

"I haven't decided," Wade replied. "If you're through swilling coffee, I'd like you to get me a horse and some clothes to fit the horse—only I'll wear the clothes if you savvy."

"Shore, boss," Buck nodded. "Where we ridin'?"

"I'm riding alone, Buck. I'm going out to Bart's grave."

Buck left. He was back shortly, bringing an entire outfit of clothing, not unlike his own garb, to Wade's room. When Wade hastily changed and descended, a saddled bay gelding was waiting at the hitchrail.

The East had never erased one trait of Wade's boyhood and that was his love for riding. His horsemanship was nothing to be ashamed of as he mounted, spurred toward the outskirts of town where memory told him the graveyard would be.

Memory served him right. The cemetery was hidden from the town's view by a little bluff. A low wooden fence enclosed the place and, within that sagging barrier, graves were scat-

tered in jumbled, weed-mottled disorder. Wade surveyed the place from his saddle and his questing eyes soon found the freshly-created mound that marked Bart's last resting place.

DISMOUNTING, sombrero in hand, Wade approached his uncle's grave. A wooden head-piece identified it. Lettered by the same unskilled hand that had placed the legend on the window of the *Morling Clarion,* it gave Bart's name and the date of his death.

Here lay the man who had been everything to Wade, the poor pitiful remains probably mangled beyond recognition. A feeling of duty unfulfilled smote him as he stood with bared head beneath the morning sun. Somewhere the man who had ordered this deed went unmolested to plan other equally sordid crimes. Standing there, Wade unconsciously clenched his fist at the thought. And he was unashamed of his smarting eyes as he turned, at last, to the horse.

Back in the saddle, he impulsively headed the mount toward the trail that led to the Leaning Circle. The spread lay [illegible] east of Morling, he knew, and almost within the shadows of the eastern S[illegible] tooths.

His mind was on Bart as he rode along. A thousand memories paraded before him and each of those memories was a reminder that he owed a debt to Bart Mavity that he could never possibly pay. Yet there was something he could do for Bart, if he wished, and that something was to accept the mask of Black-Mask.

Thus Wade faced, again, the decision he would have to make. And he was still facing it when he topped a bluff to sight buildings ahead of him. This was the Leaning Circle. He couldn't see the remains of Bart's shack for the bunkhouse obstructed his view but that, in itself, was a surprise. He hadn't known whether the bunkhouse would still be standing but it was, and so were the corrals, all in a fair state of repair.

The sun, climbing higher, had dispelled the cool of the morning. Wade leisurely walked the bay to a patch of shade behind the bunkhouse. He was just dismounting when a sound stabbed the silence, a sound that sent him around the building on flying feet. Someone had screamed, a high-pitched scream, that spoke of a desperate need.

Buck had included two holstered six-guns with the garb he had fetched. Wade mentally thanked the cowboy for his foresight as he snatched one of the weapons. Gun in hand, he rounded a corner and burst upon a scene that sent anger flaming through him.

A huge bearded man sat his horse near the gash in the earth where Bart's shack had been. Nearby were two riderless mounts while, at the edge of the debris-littered hole, a second man struggled with a writhing girl. She had screamed the once but her lips were now tightly pressed as though she sensed the futility of crying and was concentrating her entire strength to fight off the man.

They weren't aware of Wade's approach until he was almost upon them. He had walked his horse the last mile and his approach had been silent enough to hide his nearness from the trio. Their first intimation of his presence came when he fired, an angry unaimed snapshot that tore away the horseman's sombrero, froze his sardonic grin.

"Raise your hands!" Wade ordered.

Instantly the big man complied and the girl's assailant, a small rat-like fellow, followed suit. The girl ran to Wade at once, a move he appreciated since neither man would claw for a weapon on the presumption that he wouldn't fire for fear of hitting the girl.

Wade commanded the situation. "Who are these fellows?" he asked the girl.

"I never saw them before," she sobbed. "Some of the Boss' Bunch no doubt. They were trying to kidnap me."

"Shall I take them to town and turn them over to the law?" he asked and sensed the futility of his own suggestion. He'd had a sample of Morling's law and that sample was still fresh in his mind.

"Let them go," the girl said almost wearily. "There wouldn't be much use in doing that."

He was satisfied to comply. The tableau couldn't last forever—him holding the gun, the men clawing at the sky, the girl crouched at his side. "Mount," he commanded curtly. "And move on. But if I ever catch either of you molesting this girl, or any other, I'll gun-whip you to death."

THE pair silently turned and eagerly spurred away. When they had become illusive specks far out on the prairie, Wade felt the pressure of the girl's hand upon his arm.

"My name is Judy Wynne," she smiled. "I wish I knew how I could thank you."

It was Wade's first opportunity to really look at her and she was worth a long look. Her face, oval-shaped, was pretty and there was a hint of Irish in her laughing blue eyes, a glint of copper in the dark brown curls that peeped beneath her sombrero. The litheness of her figure, clad in riding garb, gave a suggestion of strength that did not detract from her feminine grace. He guessed she wasn't much over twenty.

Her name had a familiar ring. Mev Wynne had been the cattle king of the section in the old days. His spread bordered the Mavity ranch to the north. This, then, must be Mev's daughter, a rangeland princess in her own right.

Wade introduced himself. "I'm glad I happened along," he added sincerely.

"Wade Mavity . . . You're Bart's nephew! I've heard him speak of you so often. . . ."

"For a recluse," Wade commented, "Bart seemed to have a heap of friends."

"Yes, and I was proud to be one of them," she said. "I used to call here often and I still ride this way, almost from habit. But I shouldn't have come alone."

Wade frowned. "I heard there was trouble around Morling. I didn't know it included kidnapping girls."

"They'll do anything," the girl cried. "You'd think they had a personal grudge against Dad and the others with their rustling and robbing and burning. We've had a hard winter and a dry summer and we can't hold out against this new trouble."

"Can't something be done?" Wade demanded. "Why don't the ranchers organize and stamp out this thing?"

"I've asked those same questions myself!" she replied bitterly. "Every rancher is fighting a lone hand instead of asking his neighbor to help. Dad's as bad as the rest of them."

"Somebody ought to grab the reins."

"Yes, but who?" she demanded fiercely. "I wish I were a man. I'd be a second Black-Mask!"

She was very pretty in her anger. Wade chuckled. "From what I've heard," he said, "Black-Mask *is* in the saddle again."

"Is it really true?" she asked eagerly. "Some claim they've seen him. Some say it's just rumor. What do you know about it?"

Wade looked into her hope-filled eyes. He saw her breasts rising and falling as she waited for his reply. She might have symbolized all those far-

flung range people as she stood there—oppressed, yet defiant; eager for the coming of one who would lead the way. Yet Wade knew his answer would be his decision, irrevocable as a given promise.

"He's back alright," Wade said slowly. "I've heard things around Morling—things I can't tell you about. But I can promise you this—Black-Mask is in the saddle again."

CHAPTER VIII

Black-Mask Rides Again

THUS Wade Mavity made his decision. Although the desperate plea of Judy Wynne had been a deciding factor in prompting that decision, it was not impulse that had made Wade speak. The sight of a grave had spurred him toward staying, the helplessness of a girl had cemented the decision. And, characteristically, Wade be[illegible] ce to plan a campaign of [illegible] north

[illegible]st w[illegible] Judy back to the Crippled X[illegible] saw [illegible]ed many details concerning the [illegible] that raged on the range. Herd after herd had disappeared in the weary watches of the night, outlying ranchers had been wrenched from sleep by crackling flames that ate their barns and corrals, solitary riders vanished only to be found dead. The Crippled X had been harder hit than most as its vast herds were prizes to tempt rustlers again and again. The girl freely admitted that the spread was mortgaged to the hilt. Wade, listening, knew a burning eagerness to try his strength against the ruthless foe.

Mev Wynne was absent when the pair arrived at the ranch house and Wade reluctantly refused the girl's invitation to await Wynne's return. Wade had some planning to do and he wanted to be alone to do it. Promising to call later, he wheeled his horse and headed for Morling.

One thing was certain, he decided. If he remained in Morling he must have a legitimate excuse for doing so. Already he was under suspicion. He guessed that the evil forces were far too wily to be fooled into believing that his ranch would entice him into staying.

Still, there should be something to which he could turn his hand in order to divert questioning eyes from his real activities. His mind sought that something as he jogged across sage-mottled miles. Before the false-fronts of Morling were within shooting distance pure inspiration came to him for he had found the answer!

That was why Buck Callahan gazed at his employer in stupefied amazement when Wade met the puncher next day.

"Care to buy a subscription to the *Morling Clarion?*" Wade asked innocently.

"And why in blazes should I?" Buck demanded.

"Because it's going to be worth reading," Wade explained. "I'm going to buy the sheet."

Buck voiced his disbelief but Wade had spoken the truth. Buying the paper would serve a double purpose. Wade's ownership of the *Clarion* would act as an effective blind for his night-riding and, at the same time, the press would lash apathetic ranchers into a fighting group. When an uncle of Kemp's, a grizzled counterpart of the deceased editor, arrived in Morling within the week to claim Kemp's body. Wade made the man an immediate proposition and transacted the fastest deal in the history of a town where business was apt to be unbusinesslike.

The following week was a busy one for Wade. He had to clean his newly-

acquired premises and he had to do it alone since Buck spent most of his time rehabilitating the Leaning Circle. The new editor had been in possession scarcely forty-eight hours when an itinerant printer drifted in and applied for a job. He was a lazy-looking man who called himself Craft. Wade hired him in the hope that the fellow would belie his appearance and live up to his name. Craft proved to be far from a skilled workman but he could perform routine tasks with stolid efficiency which left Wade free for other things.

He was going to need that time. He would be an editor by day, gradually welding the ranchers into a compact group by scathingly denouncing their attitude in his sheet. By night he would be Black-Mask, gathering items to garnish his pages and striking such blows as he could.

HIS plans were made before his first edition went to press. The *Clarion* was a weekly with the bulk of the work centering in a twenty-four hour period. By evening the forms were locked and ready for the little press with the coming of morning. Craft had left for his lodgings and Wade squatted in the office door, contented with the day's efforts.

A full moon, blood red, tipped the eastern Sawtooths and slowly changed to orange as it climbed to silver the patches between the grotesque shadows of the buildings. There was magic in the night and Wade found himself strangely restless. A desire for action stirred within him and gradually shaped itself into a definite plan.

Buck had discovered that Crippled X punchers were watching the small Mavity herd, pending the arrival of the heir. Upon relieving them of their task, Buck had selected a horse for Wade from Bart's saddle string. It was another bay gelding, almost a twin of the animal Wade had hired. Now it stood at the hitching rack, pawing restlessly.

Wade had transferred his few belongings from the Fairview House to a little room behind the print shop, his new living quarters. Heading for the room, Wade dumped Black-Mask's garb into a burlap sack and fastened the bundle to the saddle horn. Then he mounted and sought the northward trail out of town.

His destination was the hidden rendezvous Bart had mentioned in his letter, the little cabin used by the first Black-Mask. Wade intended to leave the regalia in the hideout so that no one might accidentally discover the garments in the *Clarion* building. Once the flickering lights of Morling were behind an obsession began to grow and that obsession was to don the garb of Black-Mask. There was no reason for doing so since he was making no foray against the enemy this night. But, grinning to himself, he dismounted and quickly switched clothing, stowing his own garb in the sack.

The night-hued garments fitted well and the full-face mask served to disguise his voice, he found. When he swung into the saddle again it came to him that now indeed, Black-Mask was riding again. Yet by virtue of that very fact, the deadly importance of this phase of his inheritance struck him forcibly now that he had actually stepped into the role. It was as though something of his uncle's sincerity and purposefulness had been donned with the garb.

Skirting the Leaning Circle, he noticed an unwinking eye of light in the temporary shack Buck had thrown up. Wade grinned as he wondered what Buck would think if he saw his employer now. At times Wade had toyed with the notion of letting Buck into his secret. Only Bart's injunction to tell

no one had shackled his tongue.

As the miles slid behind, Wade wished he'd kept the part of Bart's letter that referred to the hideout. There might be considerable territory to explore before he found the cabin and night made a disadvantage. The moon had climbed directly overhead, a pale disc that would soon vanish, while the hills loomed dark and formidable, crossed and intersected with coulees. On a guess he turned up a dark ravine. Tall fir trees covered its sides and made a pathway of shadows as the horse plodded forward.

Emerging from the ravine, Wade found himself in a natural pocket in the hills. Before him lay an open space, moonbathed, and on three sides he saw the dark mouths of gullies that also emptied into the clearing. But the sight that really held his eyes was a little cabin standing almost directly before him.

Made from logs from the surrounding hills, the cabin was ramshackle and the thatched gabled roof sagged wearily as though it had borne its own weight too many years. An air of desertion clung to it but Wade had acquired caution with the assumption of his dangerous heritage. Dismounting many yards away, he led his horse deep into the shadows, then stole forward.

The door creaked protestingly as he pushed it. Inside was blackness. Groping, Wade got a match aflame. The flickering light revealed a sight that caused him to recoil. Dirty dishes studded a greasy table and several unmade bunks gave mute testimony that the place had been inhabited, and recently. Nondescript garments hung from wall pegs.

FOR a brief moment Wade had thought that he'd stumbled upon Bart's hideout but now he knew differently. The one quick glance before the match spluttered out told him that. He groped for another match, scanned the floor, the walls, the ceiling. Then he froze into immobility. Hoofs were beating out somewhere beyond.

In the ceiling above was a shoulder-wide hole that apparently led to a little attic beneath the gabled roof. Feeling his way cautiously, Wade found the table and mounted it. Another precious moment was wasted in groping for the opening but he found it and quickly drew himself upward. He could hear the voices of men for the approaching riders were now very near. As Wade settled himself in the choking dust of the attic, saddle leather creaked, for men were dismounting.

Scarcely daring to breathe, Wade stretched himself full length. The newcomers might be far-riding cowpokes of some peaceful rancher who used the place for a line shack. Considering the location it was more probable, on the other hand, that he'd stumbled upon a rustlers' hideout.

Many feet shuffled across the floor. A match scratched and flared in the darkness and in a moment lamp light mellowed the room. Wade discovered a knot hole in the rough planking of the ceiling and had a view of the room below.

Five men had arrived and among them the unmistakable bulk of Steve Metcalfe loomed large. Nearby stood little Shaw, still wearing the marks of the brutal treatment he had received from his companions. The three others were rough-looking men, tramps of the range. All were talking at once, directing a throng of questions, it seemed, at Metcalfe who waved a huge paw like a grizzly beset by bees.

"No use in you jaspers plaguin' me," he growled. "I've told yuh I don't know who the Boss's sendin' here tonight. The Big Boss hid a note in the usual place. If I'd knowed yuh was goin' to be so

consarned curious about it, I'd 'a' saved it."

"Damn it, it ain't right, Steve," one ejaculated with a shake of his head. "Grantin' the Big Boss wants to have a straw boss to tell us what to do, why couldn't he pick one of us, like you, for instance? Who the hell is this stranger we gotta take orders from him?"

"How do I know?" Metcalfe demanded. "Reckon he must be one salty hombre or the Boss wouldn't be cuttin' him in."

"He's comin'!" somebody husked as hoofs thundered outside. "Get ready to size up yore new prod, gents."

Wade leaned forward eagerly, his eye glued to the knot hole. The peril of his position was forgotten as he waited to see the man who was the newly-chosen lieutenant of the Big Boss. He saw the lamp flare wildly as the door swung open and a man stepped inside.

"Who sent yuh?" Metcalfe challenged him.

"The Big Boss," the newcomer said easily but his voice was metallic. "Reckon you know who I am."

He was a man to be remembered, this newcomer. Well over six foot and powerfully proportioned, he filled the doorway, his snapping black eyes running over the men inside. A battered sombrero shoved carelessly back revealed crisp black hair that combined with equally dark eyebrows and a thick black moustache to make his face seem almost pale. His features were not unhandsome and, all in all, he was a striking specimen. But it was not the physical man but the stamp of leadership upon him that impressed Wade.

"I'm Steve Metcalfe," that man said and extended his hand. "We didn't get yore name. All the Boss said was that you'd be our prod from now on. If you'll call yore brand, I'll introduce yuh to the rest of the boys."

It was then that little Shaw raised his arm, an alarming gesture, that made the little man the center of attention.

"Easy, everybody!" he hissed shrilly. "I thought I heard something moving in the attic!"

Silence dropped like a shroud over the little group as every eye turned ceilingward. Then, as though a signal had been given, each man reached for a holstered six-gun.

CHAPTER IX

Law and Outlaw

DEATH was grinning at Wade and he knew it. No one of those outlaws grouped below would hesitate to blast the life from any eavesdropper and when the eavesdropper happened to be Black-Mask the danger was doubled. So Wade cautiously drew his legs beneath him. His only hope was to drop through the hole into their midst, taking a grim chance that an unexpected attack might give him some slight advantage.

Gun in hand, Steve Metcalfe reached and extinguished the lamp. It was a smart move since Metcalfe and the others had been obvious targets for a hidden gunman. Yet Wade welcomed the darkness for it fitted into his plan. He was inching toward the hole when the night breeze sighed through the hills. A tree grew behind the cabin and a leafy branch scraped the rooftop. Metcalfe snorted in disgust.

"Shaw jumps everytime a couple o' leaves rub agin each other," he announced with a raucous laugh. "It 'pears he's got me doin' it, too." He must have turned on the little man then. "The next time yuh shoot off yore face for nothin', I'm bootin' yuh from here

to Pass Junction."

"I tell you, I heard something up there!" Shaw insisted.

"Maybe we ought to look, Steve," another suggested.

Wade chose that moment to pull himself erect. Almost with the same motion he stepped through the hole in the ceiling, plunged downward. It was as good a time as any since, for the moment, Metcalfe had partially convinced himself that no danger existed. Thus Metcalfe wasn't prepared. Wade struck the table, smashing it to kindling as he launched himself onto Metcalfe, knocking the big man to the floor.

Metcalfe didn't stir beneath him for Metcalfe was unconscious. That was pure good luck for Wade. He hadn't had the time or the opportunity to plan his jump and he hadn't counted on putting one of the Boss' Bunch *hors de combat* so easily. But there were others in the cabin and those others were closing in, bellowing in rage as they came.

Wade dashed toward the door, stiff-arming men to left and right as he charged. No one dared fire. It was impossible to tell friend from foe in that pitch-shrouded jumble. But now, with the lamp out, a silver path of moonlight divided the room as the moon, settling between two peaks, threw its light through the window. Wade had to cross that path to get to the door.

He didn't hesitate. Shaking off a clutching hand, he whisked through the moonlight, crossing the path like a released bullet. He moved swiftly but for a single instant he was revealed in his black garb. That instant was enough. Little Shaw's voice rose, shrill with terror.

"It's Black-Mask!" he screamed. "It's him!"

"Black-Mask!" The echo came from the region of the door where a huge form bulked in the darkness, the form of the big stranger who had come to take command. Zig-zagging forward, Wade butted into him, head down. The man's breath left him with a *whoosh!* Wade saw the fellow crumple to the floor. Then Wade was over him, wrenching at the door, diving outside.

He was clear of the cabin but, by that very token, he was in greater danger since now the others could use their guns. And they were using them as they spewed from the cabin. Orange flame-tongues licked at the night but Wade was already into the bushes, thrashing toward his horse. Swinging into the saddle, he clattered down the trail that had brought him into the ravine. The first turn freed him from the menace of flying lead.

He didn't fear pursuit. Two of the six back at the cabin were in no condition for riding and those two were the former lieutenant of the Big Boss and the new lieutenant. Fear-ridden Shaw could also be discounted. And with the moon, a pale ghost of its former ruddy self, disappearing behind the mountains to leave the land swathed in darkness, pursuit would be futile with the start Wade had. By the time those leaderless outlaws were in the saddle there would be no means of finding the quarry.

THUS, as Wade put spurs to his horse, he let his mind turn to other things as he thundered toward Morling. He had learned one thing this night that amazed him. Not even the gunhawks who rode at the command of the Big Boss had ever seen the face of their ghost-like leader. Exposing the Boss was going to be no easy chore. Only one man could identify the leader and that man was the dynamic stranger who had been made sub-leader of the lawless legion. Wade wondered when his trail would again cross with the stranger's.

Morling was wrapped in silence

when he arrived. Still wearing the garb of Black-Mask, he made his way to his quarters undetected. It was almost morning by the time he tumbled into bed and it seemed that he scarcely closed his eyes before light was peeping beneath the shade. Yet he forced himself to be up and about in spite of his scanty sleep. There was a paper to be put out and Craft would need his help.

By noon the edition was on the street, the mailing list was wrapped and addressed and Wade found time to relax at his desk and wonder what the town's reaction would be.

Much of the paper's contents was like Kemp's sheet had been; gossipy news-notes designed to appeal to the townspeople. But boxed off on the front page and headed by an eye-catching caption was an editorial that Wade hoped would arouse attention. Here he introduced himself and spoke at length about his impression of conditions as he'd found them upon his return. He closed with a thinly-veiled insinuation that it was high time the ranchers took matters into their own hands if the law couldn't cope with the rustlers.

And the first to visit Wade was the law personified. Sheriff Vic Bohler sauntered into the *Clarion's* office a scant half-hour after Craft had passed out the papers on the street. Wade hadn't seen the lawman since the night of Kemp's death. He was surprised to have Bohler greet him with a vacuous grin.

"I'm sorta peeved at you," the sheriff announced poutingly.

Wade could only stare. "Are you?" he prompted.

"Shore I am. You set yourself up here as an editor and I never yet come in and told you how you should run a newspaper."

"That's right," Wade agreed.

"Then out comes your first paper," the sheriff went on. "And what do you do but up and tell me how I should run my job. 'Tain't fair."

Wade looked at Bohler with new interest. Buck Callahan had claimed that Bohler wasn't the fool he pretended to be. For the first time, Wade wondered if the cowboy were right.

"Somebody had to call your attention to the fact that you were slipping up on your official duties," Wade argued.

"You think so? Wa-al, maybe. It's all in the way you look at it. Some might say my job is caring for the interests of the people in this here county. Grantin' it is, then I gotta warn you that you're breeding trouble, son. A few more editorials like this one today and the rustlers is liable to get plumb peeved at you and we'll be needin' a new editor. Better run the kind of paper Lawson used to have. It's better to be a live Kemp than a dead Mavity."

"That's the way you figure it, eh?" Wade challenged. "Looks like running the right kind of paper didn't save Kemp's neck."

"Maybe Kemp was thinkin' seriously about doin' a little blastin' in his paper, son," Bohler countered. "You don't know why he died."

"Do you?" Wade demanded but the sheriff was already waddling toward the door, one plump paw raised in a gesture of farewell.

"I'll be damned," Wade whistled after he'd gone.

THERE had been real meaning hidden in the words of the sheriff. He had frankly warned Wade not to proceed with the campaign he'd launched. But why? Was the sheriff in league with the outlaws? Or had he warned Wade as a friendly gesture because he really feared for the newsman's life? Wade wondered.

Still, the paper had stirred some action. Wade felt a certain satisfaction

because he had provoked a visit from the law. Would some member of the lawless faction also be goaded into making a personal call? Sooner or later Steve Metcalfe would be calling, Wade knew. Steve Metcalfe would be raring for a chance to restore his shattered fistic reputation by a second fight. Wade expected that visit but he hoped there would be another as well. Perhaps the Big Boss, himself, might call in the guise of a citizen of the town.

Those thoughts were flitting through Wade's mind when a shadow seeped across his desk as a large form blocked the doorway. Wade raised his eyes—and almost jumped.

Standing there was the mighty stranger who had appeared at the outlaw lair the night before—the man who was to be the Big Boss' lieutenant. There was no mistaking him. Wade's wish had been fulfilled—with a vengeance.

"You the editor?" the man asked.

"I am," Wade managed to reply.

"I got some news for your paper," the big man said. "I reckon you've been around here long enough to have heard about me. And I reckon you'll know a real story when you hear it. How would you like to tell your readers that an old resident has returned after a mighty long spell, just to finish something he started the last time he was in these parts? Think they'd be interested?"

"Sounds like good copy," Wade answered mechanically. "Who are you?"

"Name's Dorgan—Trigger Dan Dorgan. And just one thing fetched me back to Morling. I've come here to kill Black-Mask!"

CHAPTER X

The Ambition of Trigger Dan

IF SATAN himself had appeared in the doorway, materializing from a sulphurous cloud, Wade would have been less startled than he was.

Dorgan's name was legend in Morling, his exploits were tales that grew with the years. A good part of his history had come to Wade in his talk with Lawson Kemp. Bart's letter had also referred to this famous gunman. To discover that Trigger Dan had returned to his old haunts was like a smashing blow. To have him bluntly state that his purpose in returning was to destroy Black-Mask struck Wade like the impact of a bullet. He stared with incredulous eyes until a slow grin spread over the gunman's face.

"You look like you was seeing a ghost," Dorgan observed. "You've heard of me?"

"Everyone has," Wade admitted. "We thought you were still in prison."

Dorgan glided forward and eased himself into a chair. Beneath his coldness lurked the human trait of egotism for it was obvious that he was enjoying Wade's undisguised surprise. Sprawling contentedly, Dorgan crossed his chapajerosed legs and grinned at the newsman.

"I was," he confessed, "up to three years ago. Once in a while they shorten a gent's sentence for good behavior."

Wade warmed in turn. His natural astonishment was passing and Dorgan no longer looked so formidable. The man had an attractive side to his personality and seated now with fingers fumbling for a Durham sack, he might have been some easy-going cowhand

who had dropped in for a friendly call.

"I take it you've reformed," Wade commented drily.

Dorgan, building a smoke, kept one eye on his task, cocked the other at Wade. "Sure I reformed," he said. "I reformed so well they hacked a slice off my term. The warden didn't know I was leavin' to kill a man."

"You carry a grudge a long time."

"I pack no grudge," Dorgan retorted to Wade's surprise. "I've got nothing personal ag'in Black-Mask. I done some rustling and he helped catch me. I got sent up for a few years. That's the way things goes in this pasture, younker. We can't all be rustlers and we can't all be justice riders. I made my choice so why should I pack a grudge?"

"But you're going to—"

"I'm going to kill Black-Mask," Dorgan finshed. "But that don't say I hate him. Fact is, I've always had a sneakin' likin' for that hombre. It's just that I gotta kill him or he's gotta kill me, that's all."

Light began to dawn upon Wade and he saw the shape of an incredible truth. Here was this taste of the gun that Bart had described. By his own admission, Dorgan bore no ill-will toward Black-Mask. Yet Dorgan was back to kill Black-Mask. There could be only one reason and Dorgan put it into words.

"I'm believin' my luck was ag'in me the day I stood before Black-Mask. I gotta find out for sure which of us is the best man and when I find out, one of us is apt to camp in Boothill. I reckon you've heard about the first tangle we had."

Wade nodded. A scowl erased the contented look from the gunman's face. "Everybody has," he rasped. "That's why I gotta get me another chance."

Here was a poser. Wade was hearing his own doom pronounced. He had accepted the dangers of his heritage unhesitantly but he hadn't guessed they would include a fight with Dorgan. The fate that Bart had sought to escape by hiding his own identity was being wished upon his heir. It was one matter to take his chances against the outlaws of the Flats. It was another with Dorgan taking a hand in the game.

Now Wade could understand why the Big Boss had made this man his right hand. Rumor whispered that Black-Mask was riding again. And the Big Boss had been quick to sense that Trigger Dan would be anxious to meet with his ancient Nemesis again. That made Trigger Dan and the Big Boss natural allies. And Trigger Dan was cut for the job of leading the lawless horde that served the unknown master.

HE jerked himself from his thoughts with a start, conscious of Dorgan's scrutiny.

"You mean to say that after these years in prison you've come back just to take up where you left off?" Wade asked.

"That's the idea. I waited a lot of years and those years each had some three hundred odd days—and nights. The days weren't so bad. It was the nights that were long. I'd lay in my cell and figger just which button on Black-Mask's shirt I'd aim at. It was slow work—just waitin'. After the first few years they give me a job takin' care of the warden's flower gardens."

A snort that spurted smoke from Dorgan's nostrils punctuated this statement. "Me!—ridin' herd on lilacs! It kept me under the sun, though, and I could feel the breeze from the hills. I used to pick up pebbles and arrange 'em in rows. Seven rocks made a week, fifty-two rows made a year. Every day I'd throw away a pebble and figger I was a day nearer to him!"

Pausing, he ground the cigarette beneath his heel while his black eyes

snapped angrily.

"Why couldn't they have told me how much they was choppin' off for good behavior?" he demanded. "A thousand days that I figgered was between me and him. A thousand days I wouldn't have had to count."

It was unbelievable, this obsession of Trigger Dan's. Yet, Wade, studying the man, couldn't doubt his sincerity, couldn't doubt this incredible tale of an ambition that had festered within prison walls.

"Why didn't you come back to Morling as soon as you were released?" he couldn't help but ask.

"I did," was the surprising answer. "He hadn't been heard of since I'd left, they told me. Nobody recognized me so I cut the breeze, thinkin' maybe Black-Mask had moved to other range. The trail ended in Mexico where I got tangled up in a revolution. That's where I found that prison hadn't stolen my old gun-speed. It was some satisfaction but it didn't mean much if I couldn't find Black-Mask. 'The hombre that beat Trigger Dan?' they'd say along the trail. 'He ain't been seen here.' That's the way they remembered him. The hombre that beat Trigger Dan!

"I began to figger he was dead. Then I run across a saddle tramp from the flats down in Sonora. We shared a fire one night and he told me hell had busted loose around Morling. I wasn't much interested till this buckaroo mentions that some are sayin' Black-Mask is riding again. Before morning I was across the Arizona border and burnin' leather north."

"And is Black-Mask around here?" Wade inquired blandly.

"Reckon he is," Dorgan said cautiously. "And someday my chance will come, in front of plenty of witnesses like it was before. Then I'll know whether I was unlucky that other day."

"And it's O. K. to print this in my paper?"

"You bet," said Trigger Dan. "People ain't forgot me hereabouts. There's liable to be some whisperin' when Dan Dorgan shows up with hell already poppin'. All I'm interested in is Black-Mask. I don't want some John Law tapping me on the shoulder everytime somebody loses a few cows. That's why I'd appreciate it if you'd announce in your paper that I'm back to get Black-Mask and for no other reason. You can quote me as sayin' that if everybody else minds his own business, I'll tend to mine."

Wade made a few penciled jottings on a note pad, a meaningless gesture. Actually his mind was probing for the real purpose behind Dorgan's request for publicity. And that reason was obvious. Dorgan actually wanted to meet Black-Mask again. There could be no doubt about that. But his claim to having only one piece of business to attend to in Morling was sheer pretense.

Dorgan's reputation wasn't forgotten. Folks would expect to find him involved in the rustling since that had been his profession of old. So Dorgan intended the newspaper announcement to be a blind to fool the range into believing that his sole purpose in returning was to finish his fight. By making his chief ambition seem his only aim he could divert attention from his lawlessness. It was a pat scheme.

"Reckon all the ranchers take your paper," Dorgan said. "Maybe Black-Mask will get hold of it and come and look me up."

"Maybe he will," Wade agreed.

"I'm thankin' you," Dorgan said, and moved toward the door. Wade watched him go. And there was something in the makeup of Wade Mavity that forced him to grin as Trigger Dan turned his back on the very man he sought so ardently and headed up the street.

CHAPTER XI

Fight Talk

LONG before the echo of Trigger Dan Dorgan's bootheels had faded into the distance, the grin had vanished from Wade's face. And though he absently pulled a pad and pencil toward him, Wade's mind was not on work. To every man who changes trails there comes a time when he must choose, again, between the old trail and the new. Wade Mavity was facing such a choice as he considered this latest development in his career as Black-Mask.

There was danger enough attached to the heritage he had accepted. Now that danger was increased a thousandfold. It was one thing to accept the night-riding role that Bart Mavity had wished upon him. It was quite another thing to accept that part of his heritage which meant he might someday face Trigger Dan over a gunsight. Bart Mavity had had sufficient gun-skill for such a test. Wade, Eastern-reared, knew his own deficiency.

Yet as he pondered in grim-faced silence, he knew the birth of a determination to make himself adept with the six-gun. Dorgan's challenge was arousing his inherent fighting blood. And Trigger Dan's claim to greater gun-skill since his release from prison sounded like sheer braggadocio. If a battle with the famous gun-hawk was inevitable, at least the outcome wasn't necessarily a foregone conclusion. And from that thought grew Wade's ambition to perfect himself with the six-gun.

And why not? In this land where Colonel Colt held sway, he would need such skill constantly.

His decision made, he began to scribble an article for the next paper. Flowing words told in length of Trigger Dan Dorgan's return and of the gun-hawk's desire to meet Black-Mask. The people of Morling, Wade suggested, might do well to forget Dorgan's past record and give the rustler a chance to prove that he was now within the law.

There was sheer hypocrisy in the piece and the smell of it sickened Wade as he worked. He consoled himself with a promise that he would expose Dorgan at the earliest opportunity. Yet that would have to be done in a manner that would not implicate himself. He wasn't yet ready to openly antagonize the famous gunman. But when the chance came to strike a hidden blow at the man, he'd strike hard. And that chance came sooner than Wade expected. . . .

Riding alone one afternoon during the following week, Wade found the cabin hideout of Bart Mavity. The place proved to be only a few miles south of the rustlers' lair he had stumbled upon and was equally well hidden from casual eyes. The shelves were stocked with food while blankets and cooking utensils were also plentiful. Wade searched the place carefully, hoping to find another mesage from Bart, some postscripted information gathered since his uncle had written his last letter. There was nothing of the sort to be found.

Bart had told him that his mount pastured nearby. The discovery of the black mare proved a real thrill for Wade. She was the personification of beauty in horseflesh with lines that promised both speed and bottom. Wade hungered to try her speed but there was neither time nor opportunity for the test. Reluctantly he headed back to Morling.

The afternoon following the appearance of Wade's second issue as editor brought a caller, a lath-like puncher from the Crippled X. Mev Wynne, it

seemed, hankered for the presence of Wade Mavity at his supper table that night in order to properly thank him for the newsman's work at the Leaning Circle the day Wade had met Judy. Would Wade be there?

"You can bet your hoss and saddle I'll be there!" Wade told the lanky puncher.

Wade had intended to visit the cattle king. It was only proper that he thank Wynne for looking after the Mavity spread since Bart's death, wasn't it? That was Wade's excuse to himself but he didn't deny that he hankered for another glimpse of Mev's pretty daughter.

FIVE O'CLOCK was the schedule time for supper but Wade was on the trail to the Crippled X early and his efforts to curb the spirited bay were only half-hearted. As he approached the two-story frame ranch-house of the Wynnes he saw a showy team of horses hitched to an elagant buggy standing at the arched gate of the low fence surrounding the well-kept yard. He had seen the vehicle and team in Morling many times but had never met the owner. He wondered who the second guest might be.

Judy met him at the door, looking cool and ethereal in a floor-length white dress that sheathed her shapeliness. Wade had never seen her in feminine clothes and the sight left him stammering.

"Hello, stranger," she said and her voice was as heart-warming as her appearance. "Come in and meet an old neighbor. Dad's been waiting."

She led the way to a large living room. Before the black, yawning mouth of a great stone fireplace sat two men and Wade had no trouble guessing which was the Crippled X boss. Mev Wynne was a ponderous man, crag-like in face and formation. Iron-gray hair thatched a massive head and a drooping moustache ineffectively hid a determined, fighting mouth.

He grasped Wade's hand in a rock-crushing grip before Judy could introduce them, his voice booming like thunder. "So you're the buckaroo that scared tarnation outa them whelps that tackled Judy. Shore proud to know you, Mavity."

The other visitor had risen to his feet at Wade's entrance and now stood watching silently. Wynne turned to him.

"Mavity," he boomed, "meet Jud Godfrey. Or maybe you know each other already? Jud's the banker in Morling and you've been around long enough by now for him to have a part interest in your paper."

The remark, veiled as pleasantry, left Wade with the impression that Mev Wynne cared little for his visitor. Wade instinctively shared this dislike. Godfrey was a tall, cadaverous creature. Long sideburns framed a hawk-like face. His eyes were small and shrewd, his nose bulbous and prominent.

Godfrey's hand was clammy to the touch and as the banker murmured the customary words, Wade found the keynote to his dislike. Insincerity sprouted from this man. Being pleasant was obviously part of Jud Godfrey's stock in trade but at the same time the steel hand of his nature was poorly concealed by the velvet glove of his demeanor. Wade was glad when Mev Wynne made an immediate suggestion.

"Show this young feller around the place, Judy," he said. "Me and Jud's got a few things to wrangle and we'll see you at supper."

Outside, Judy proudly pointed out the peeled-pole corrals, the mammoth barn, the long bunkhouse, the flowers she had planted in the yard. But Wade's eyes were more often upon her face than upon the things she indicated.

"I don't believe you're listening to a

thing I say," she finally pouted. "Now are you?"

"Guess I'm still under the influence of Godfrey's personality," Wade alibied.

She smiled wanly. "He isn't very likeable, is he? Someday I'm afraid Dad will forget himself and run Jud off the place."

Judy had once admitted that the Crippled X was heavily mortgaged. "I gather that Godfrey holds the mortgage," Wade murmured now.

"Yes, and he's pressing Dad hard. Godfrey wants him to sell some of his stock now and pay off but Dad would rather wait till fall. If he does, he's liable to have no herd at all. What good is prime beef if the rustlers get it?"

"Haven't the ranchers started to fight yet?" Wade demanded. "I'd hoped the paper would prod some life into them."

Her eyes lighted. "Your first paper was wonderful," she beamed. "I didn't like the one Slim brought back from town today, though."

"Why?" Wade asked instantly.

"The way you defended that man Dorgan!" she exclaimed. "Everyone knows he was the worst rustler who ever came around here. I'll bet he's right back at his old job again."

WADE bridled his tongue. How could he explain his motives to this girl without disclosing his entire plan? It seemed impossible, yet he found himself overwhelmed with an intense desire to stand in his true light in her eyes. He wanted words to give her some inkling of his attitude but at that moment the Chinese cook apeared in the doorway to thump a dishpan as a supper signal and the opportunity was lost. Together they hurried into the house.

The three men and the girl alone occupied the table for the range boss who usually ate in the ranch-house was absent. The Chinese cook had prepared an excellent meal but Wade's eyes were quick to note the evidence of Judy's touch in the bowls of mountain flowers that clustered the table.

The banker ate with a fastidiousness that was almost revolting. The meal underway, he fixed his shrewd gaze on Wade. "I understand you were your uncle's only heir," he said.

Wade resented the half-question. His inheritance was none of Godfrey's business but he remembered that both were guests under this roof. "Bart didn't have enough for more than one heir," he remarked pleasantly.

"The ranch, I presume, was the bulk of the estate," the banker continued.

"Chiefly," Wade admitted. "There was some money, too. I was surprised at the amount. I didn't think Bart paid enough attention to his ranch to make it pay."

"I imagine the money came from Prof. Westcott," Godfrey said.

"Prof. Westcott? Who's he?"

"Didn't Bart ever mention the Professor when he wrote?" Judy inquired in surprise.

Wade wrinkled his brow. "Can't say that he did."

"Prof was an Easterner," Judy explained. "He really was a professor at a university years ago but he—he—"

"He turned into a drunken tramp," her father finished.

Color touched the girl's cheeks. "He couldn't help it," she defended stoutly and turned to explain to Wade. "Drink is a disease with the professor. He is really a brilliant man but he lost his place over booze and went from bad to worse. A couple of years ago he drifted out here and your uncle picked him up and kept him. Bart once told me it was worth Prof's keep just to listen to him because the professor had one of the best minds in the country when he was sober."

"I never liked Prof Westcott," Wynne announced in his booming voice. "Maybe he's got a good mind but that's the trouble with him. He's all mind. He's a regular thinking machine without a soul."

"I'm afraid that's a little unjust," Godfrey interjected. "I have reasons to believe that Westcott turned a tidy sum of money over to Bart just before the—the accident."

Judy looked at Wade. "You see," she explained, "after Prof had been grub-lining off your uncle for a long time, some relative of his in the East left him a fortune. That may be where the money came from that Bart left you."

This was all news to Wade, and very interesting news. He could readily imagine Bart cultivating this drunken scapegoate for the sake of such learned company. It might be a good idea to look this fellow up, Wade decided. Perhaps, in the end, Bart might have confided some last minute findings to his friend.

"Where can I locate this Westcott?" he asked.

Judy Wynne shrugged. "I was looking for him myself the day I met you," she explained. She eyed the banker questioningly. "Have you seen him lately?"

Godfrey paused to recollect. "I seem to remember him at Bart's funeral," he mused. "But I can't be sure. There were so many folks around that day. Maybe I saw him after that, but I don't think he's been around for several weeks."

"Did you try the saloons?" Mev Wynne suggested acidly. "But Wescott probably moved on after Bart Mavity died," he added. "He used to brag that he'd seen just about all of the country. I'll bet you'll find him drunk under a table in some Wyoming saloon right now."

MEV WYNNE obviously had little use for the absent professor. Judy, on the other hand, seemed eager to defend the man. "Just the same," she reminded her father, "Prof's done great things and he'll do them again. He'll make a comeback one of these days."

Mev grunted a response that indicated he did not share her faith. The conversation, Wade decided, needed changing. Since he was anxious to broach a new plan that had occurred to him, he commenced on a fresh theme.

"What have the rustlers been doing lately?" he asked.

"Rustling," Wynne snapped emphatically.

Godfrey made an effort to look concerned. "How long is this terrible condition to exist?" he inquired wearily.

"I'll tell you," Wade retorted. "It'll continue till the ranchers get together and stamp it out!"

The banker grinned faintly. "You're quite a fire-eater young fellow," he commented with thinly veiled sarcasm. "When are the ranchers going to unite?"

"When someone takes the leadership," Wade promptly replied. He swung on Mev Wynne eagerly. "Why don't you?" he demanded.

Wynne shook his massive head. "I ain't brandin' myself chief," he replied. "I'll back up anybody that wants to start things but if I go puttin' my foot into it everybody'll say, 'There's old Wynne pushin' hisself forward. He thinks he's king of this here country.'"

"That's where you're dead wrong!" Wade declared. "People expect you to take the lead. Whether you've wanted to be or not, you're the king around here."

"Wa-al, maybe you're right," Wynne stalled. "Just the same, I got where I got by runnin' my spread and lettin' other folks run theirs. I don't think

folks would like my suggesting that everybody start minding everybody else's business."

"Why don't you try, Dad," Judy pleaded. "He's right. He's putting up the same argument I've used on you a dozen times. Somebody's got to start and you're the man."

"Shucks, honey, I wouldn't know how. Should I get me a soap box and pick out a corner in Morling and start oratin'?"

Warmed by Judy's approval, Wade broke into the conversation again. "I'll tell you how to go about it," he announced. "Tomorrow I'll plaster the town with posters announcing that the cattlemen will meet in Morling next evening to discuss combining against the rustlers. I'll tell them you're calling the meeting and will act as chairman. You start the thing off and they can pick their own chief afterwards if they want to. Will you be there?"

"Wa-al, it ain't in my line," Wynne began hesitantly.

Judy cut him off. Her fingers strayed to Wade's sleeve and tightened as though in that very gesture she was sealing an alliance between them. "Make up the posters, Wade," she said. "I'll see that Dad's there!"

CHAPTER XII

A Dead Man's Boots

NOW it was night. . . . The sun had vanished into the maw of the mountains and the shadow-legions had launched downward across the Frying Flats, marching like phantom invaders over the rangeland and into the street of the town.

One building in Morling was the center of activity this night. It was a large frame affair used for dances, theatricals and meetings of all sorts. Now its lighted windows were magnets that drew scores of men. A motley collection of buggies, buckboards and saddle horses crowded the street before the place.

Wade, true to his promise, had plastered the town with posters calling this meeting. He and Craft had worked through the night and early next morning the printer had armed himself with paste bucket, brush and posters and made the rounds. Since then the news had spread to the far reaches of the Frying Flats, bringing the ranchers drifting into town.

Judging from the turnout, the stockmen were genuinely interested in the meeting. Grim brown faces were turned toward the hall. Saddle leather creaked in the night, bit chains jingled, buckboards lumbered through the street.

No eye saw Wade as he took in all this for Wade sat his horse in the shadows at the rear of the building and the mount merged with the night while Wade, himself, was garbed in black from head to foot. Black-Mask was on hand to attend the ranchers' meeting.

Late that afternoon Wade had quietly left town, headed for Bart's old hideout. Because he'd had time to kill before returning to town again, he'd decided to while it away with gun practice. He hadn't forgotten the threat of Trigger Dan Dorgan nor the ambition that challenge had instilled within himself. He wanted to master the art of gun-slinging and this was his first opportunity to try.

Selecting a target, he spent many cartridges and learned much about reaching, drawing, firing. The results were astonishing. Leather-slapping seemed to be a natural gift. True, his proficiency was not great but in view

of his scanty experience he was more than gratified. He recalled Bart's letter which had said, ". . . I discovered . . . accidentally, that I was endowed with that certain coordination of mind, muscle and nerve that makes an exceptional gunman."

Wade wondered if such a gift could be hereditary but the thought gave him no false illusions. It might take years of practice, coupled with such ability as he had, to place him in a class with Dorgan or his uncle.

A search of the hideout had revealed an extra saddle and bridle. Wade placed the gear on the black mare and sent the bay gelding toward Morling with a flick of his quirt. The horse would eventually find its way back to town but it would stop to graze. There was a chance that the bay might arrive early, thus spreading alarm among Wade's friends, but the newsman was risking that. All these factors were important to his scheme.

With the sun hanging low over the western peaks, he had started for town on the black. She did not belie her speedy appearance. Giving the animal her head, Wade raced southward, skirting the fringe of the hills.

He'd slowed to a walk before he reached Morling and loitered beyond the outskirts until darkness descended. Afterwards he'd sought the shadows behind the meeting hall and stayed there until the crowd was inside. He had familiarized himself with the building earlier in the day and when the meeting had started he edged the mare to a window in the rear. Standing in the saddle, he raised the sash and slipped inside.

The lower floor of the building was one vast room and an impromptu stage occupied its far end. The little room into which Wade had stepped was a dressing room, used when the local young folks engaged in theatricals. The place was littered with debris and black as a tomb. Moving to the door, Wade placed his eye at a peephole cut for the convenience of actors awaiting their cues. It gave him a splendid view of the stage and the first few rows of seats.

CHAIRS and benches, appropriated to seat the crowd, were filled and the place appeared to be jammed. A lantern placed on a table on the stage gave most of the illumination though another lantern swung from the ceiling in the center of the room.

Mev Wynne was mounting the stage as Wade peered out. The rancher was plainly ill at ease but his fighting jaw jutted grimly, visible proof that Wynne was determined to go through with this job. Benches scraped, feet moved restlessly, then the murmur of voices died away and a hush descended upon the audience as the old-timer faced his neighbors.

Wynne cleared his throat, cleared it again. "Friends," he finally blurted. "I ain't no great shakes as a speaker but I figgered it was about time someone called us together to talk over a few things."

A young puncher in the crowd raised a cheer. This evidence of approval seemed only to add to the old cattleman's confusion.

"Anyhow, here's what I got to say," Mev Wynne continued gallantly. "This is everybody's party and I want to hear what some of you folks think about this rustlin'. What are we gonna do about it?"

"Sell out before they drive us out!" a voice suggested. Wade sought the speaker and had no trouble finding him. He was a ratty little man with an unshaven chin and ferret-like eyes who sat well to the front. Wynne frowned in his direction.

"You seem to want to speak up, Klein. Climb up here and tell folks all

about it," the cattleman suggested.

Totally unabashed, the unshaven man scrambled upon the stage and took a position beside Wynne. Klein, his beady eyes roving around the audience, paused to insure complete attention.

"Folks," he squeaked. "I reckon most of yuh know me. I ain't been around here long but I'm pretty good at making myself acquainted. For the benefit of those who ain't had the pleasure, the name is Klein and I run the Bar V Bar spread west o' here. Some folks call me Krazy Klein but that's because I'm crazy—like a fox."

Laughter swelled to greet this opening Klein grinned his satisfaction, plainly in his element now.

"To get down to facts, folks, I want yuh all to know I've been around here long enough to know that Mev Wynne is cattle-king of the section. 'Pears to me like we should all rally 'round and help him protect his herds. I savvy the rustlers consider his beef exter prime."

Wynne's face became apoplectic as this thrust sank home. He took a menacing step toward the trampish man. "Why, yuh ornery sidewinder—!" he began.

"Let him have his say, Mev," a voice sang out.

Wynne paused and Klein, secure in his popularity so long as he continued to entertain, turned again to his audience.

"Maybe some of yuh folks has been visited by the Easterner that figgers on buyin' up a few places around the Flats to start dude ranches," he said and a murmur of assent indicated that several had. "Seems tuh me like the smart thing to do is sell out to that gent. Rustlers is liable to ruin us all before winter, anyway. Looks like if we sell our spreads we'll take care of ourselves and beat the rustlers at the same time. This Easterner ain't interested in stock. He wants to fix the places up so the dudes can fish and hunt in the Sawtooths and ride around the Flats."

Behind the peep-hole, Wade tensed involuntarily as he listened. This was the first he had learned of an Easterner who was buying spreads in the section. Yet at the first mention of an Easterner his mind had automatically gone back to that dark alley behind the Fairmont House and a struggle and a handsome, smooth-faced man in faultless riding garb. That man had been a piece to the puzzle that had never fitted. Was Krazy Klein's Easterner that same fellow?

MEV WYNNE'S expression plainly indicated that these offers from an Easterner were news to him. Now the old rancher took a step forward.

"Folks," he said, "I didn't know as how some of you was figgerin' on selling out. My idea was to all herd together and fight the rustlers. Now, if we get together—"

"We can all guard Crippled X cattle," the voice of Klein's friend in the audience finished for him.

Wynne's patience had been taxed to the limit. Wynne's temper was about to explode. And that was the moment when Black-Mask decided to take a hand. Old Mev, the veins of his forehead jutting out like angry snakes, faced the audience. He must have seen the look of stark astonishment that came over the sea of faces for he whirled just as Black-Mask stepped onto the stage.

And it was Black-Mask who broke the thunderous silence that followed his own entry. Fixing his gaze upon Klein he spoke abruptly. "Get back to your seat," he snapped and the words hung like icicles in the air.

Klein was either reluctant to obey or too paralyzed to move. He stood

there, his jaw agape, his eyes wide.

"Git!" Black-Mask ordered.

"Do as he says, you fool!" a voice shouted—the voice of Klein's friend who had heckled Wynne. "That's Black-Mask hisself!"

Something in his friend's voice must have released Klein from his spell. Speechless, he slunk from the stage, resumed his place. Black-Mask bowed courteously to Wynne. "You're chairman here, I understand. Care if I say a few words?"

Old Mev grinned. "It's been a mighty long spell since I clapped eyes on you last, Black-Mask," he said. "But my memory ain't so short that I'd try to stop you from talkin' if you had a mind to."

Wade grinned behind his mask but his voice was icy again when he started to speak.

"Men of Morling," he began, "I'm here tonight uninvited but before I spiel my piece, I've got something to say about the man who called this meeting. Mev Wynne is trying to work out something to help everybody. I've known Mev for many years. If any man says Mev is trying to organize the ranchers for a selfish reason, that man is a liar!"

A bench creaked faintly. No other sound broke the silence as Black-Mask voiced his challenge for a legend had come to life this night. Krazy Klein and his loud-mouthed friend both gazed fixedly at the floor.

"Maybe we understand each other now," Black-Mask continued. "So we'll get down to cases. I won't bother introducing myself like Klein did. A lot of you probably remember me from the last time I rode hereabouts. I expect the rest have heard of me. I don't figger I've changed much but I can't say the same for the men of Morling."

Pausing, he selected his next words with care.

"The last time rustlers dared come to the Frying Flats they found men to fight 'em. If I didn't recognize a few faces around here I'd say those men had all died off. What's left is a bunch of prairie dogs that run yapping to their holes when trouble comes—or talk about selling out because they haven't the guts to fight for what belongs to them!"

His words rapped out like gun-fire. He had his listeners aroused and he knew it. Color drained from dozens of bronzed faces, leaving the ashy gray of anger in its place. This was his cue! He must prod their manhood, drive them to the white heat of anger by deriding their courage. This was the medicine to send them into the night fighting mad.

AND while his words lashed out, scorn piling upon scorn, he found time to marvel that not one of these fighting men dared speak up in defense. The reputation Bart Mavity had made for the name of Black-Mask hung about him like a protecting cloak. And so he talked on, lashing and cutting while the lantern in the hall burned dry and died out unnoticed as the crowd flinched before his words.

"Organize vigilante committees," he told them. "Fighting squads of men must patrol the ranges by night. Pick enough men so the rustlers won't dare tackle them. Give 'em their own medicine—lead medicine. Men like Steve Metcalfe walk the streets just because your sheriff hasn't the nerve to lock them up where they belong. How long are you going to be fooled? Trigger Dan Dorgan, the greatest rustler that ever hit the Flats, returns and just because Mavity's newspaper says that Dorgan's reformed, you swallow it and probably tell him where your primest herds are grazing. Don't you know

Dorgan is the right-hand man of the Big Boss! Wake up—"

"Anything more to say about Dan Dorgan?" a voice crackled. At the rear of the room stood the speaker and even the shadows couldn't disguise the formidable bulk of Trigger Dan.

Identification was a signal for pandemonium. In an instant benches were overturned, men were cursing hoarsely, everyone was rushing to get out of the line of fire between the ex-rustler and his ancient enemy. They had read the *Clarion* and they knew death was in the air. On the stage Black-Mask tensed, his hands stiffening at his sides.

"I've been looking for you, Black-Mask," Dorgan said slowly. "I reckon you know why."

"I've got a job to do, Dorgan," Black-Mask replied evenly. "I've got to clean up the Flats again. When that's done you'll have your day. If you've really gone straight, Dorgan, you'll wait till my work's finished. I'll meet you then, gladly."

"I've done my waiting," Dorgan gritted savagely. "Let's see if the years have speeded your draw. Slap leather!"

Death was leering now, yet Wade took time to toy with a mad thought. Why not try his new-found gun-skill against this man? It was much more to his liking to fight than to run but the notion died a-borning. The risk was too great. He had gained headway this night in his fight against the rustlers. He couldn't jeopardize himself until his work was done. The time was not ripe for a showdown with Dorgan and Black-Mask would lose no face by dodging the issue for hadn't Black-Mask bested Trigger Dan long ago?

Only the lantern upon the stage table illuminated the place now and as Dorgan's challenge rang out, Black-Mask spun and his booted foot crashed into the table, overturning it. As the room plunged into darkness, Wade leaped for the dressing-room door, jerked it open and hurtled inside. For one fleeting second he was silhouetted against the faint moonlight streaming through the outer window. A streak of orange spit toward him.

"I got him!" a voice shrilled—Krazy Klein's.

"Put down that gun!" Dorgan boomed. "He's my meat! You savvy that!"

But Wade was diving head foremost through the window. Landing on his hands in the soft loam below, he leaped to his feet, flung himself onto the black mare. Dorgan's bulk loomed in the window as he sank spurs into the mount. The gunman dropped to the ground and his six-gun stabbed the darkness, once—twice . . .

Racing to the opposite end of the town, Wade dismounted, gave the black a taste of the quirt. She responded by thundering away in the direction of the hideout. Diving into a nearby coulee, Wade hugged the ground. He was in this position when several mounted shadow-shapes galloped by his hiding place.

With the tattoo of hoofbeats dying in the distance, Wade stripped off Black-Mask's garb and cached it among the rocks. Beneath the black regalia he'd worn his regular clothing with the exception of his chaps. Satisfied that he'd been undetected, he marched into Morling. Wade reached the *Clarion* office just as Buck Callahan, breathless, came to a panting stop.

"Where in thunderation yuh been?" the cowboy wheezed.

"Walking," Wade growled. "That damn bay shied at a rattler, pitched me on my ear and bolted back to town. I shed my chaps and hoofed it. Just my luck when I wanted to be at the cattlemen's meeting. Is it over? What are you so excited about?"

"Plenty!" Buck gasped. "Black-Mask walked in on the meeting tonight. Then Trigger Dan showed up in a notch-cravin' mood. It shore busted hell outa that meeting. Come on into the office and I'll spill the whole yarn to yuh."

And an hour later when Wade tumbled into bed he smiled to himself. A dead man's boots had served him twice tonight. The reputation Bart Mavity had established had enabled him to brand scores of fighting men as cowards and remain unscathed. And the garb of Black-Mask had saved him from a second shot from Krazy Klein. Wade knew exactly why Trigger Dan Dorgan had interfered. Trigger Dan believed that at long last he'd found Black-Mask—and Trigger Dan was saving Black-Mask for his own guns.

CHAPTER VIII

The Law Makes a Move

WADE found the bay standing in its stall the next morning. The horse had wandered in sometime in the still watches of the night and he eyed Wade in a way that made him grin. It was as though the mount knew he had fulfilled an important mission and expected his performance to be duly acknowledged.

"And I'm sure thanking you for it," Wade told the animal. "But right now you and me are going to pay a social call on Mr. Krazy Klein."

From Buck Callahan, Wade had gotten a spectator's account of the doings at the meeting hall. Now Wade, as editor of the paper, was out to investigate. He wanted to know just why Klein had thrown lead at Black-Mask.

The sun was still at his back when he arrived at Klein's ranch. The Bar V Bar was as seedy and disreputable as its unkempt owner. Krazy Klein, himself, greeted the newsman from the doorway of a rickety shack which served as ranch-house. Wade had been told that Klein was a bachelor. One glimpse of the littered, slovenly interior of the shack proved the point.

"Howdy, Mavity," the ferret-eyed ranchman sang out. "Light and set a spell. Gonna sell me a subscription to yore newspaper?"

Wade showed his surprise. "You know me?" he asked.

Klein, squatting on his heels in the doorway, grinned amiably. "I sorta make it my business tuh know what's goin' on. Nacherly I heard about the trimmin' yuh gave Steve Metcalfe a while back, so I stepped around later to get a squint at the man that could do that job."

"Fame seems to have come easily to me," Wade mused. "Maybe I won't be so lucky next time I meet Metcalfe."

"Steve'll come around alright," Klein stated emphatically. He loosed a stream of tobacco juice toward the gate post. "But that ain't what yuh come to see me about.

"No, it isn't," Wade admitted. "I'm collecting all the pieces of the story of what happened last night. They tell me you were one of the meeting's leading lights."

Klein swelled perceptibly. "I reckon I had a hand in the doings."

"So I understand," Wade agreed softly. "What was the idea of slinging lead at Black-Mask?"

"A jasper that runs around the country wearin' a mask is anybody's target," Klein blustered.

"Sounded to me like he showed up last night to help you fellows out."

"Yeah, or tuh pull the wool over our eyes," Klein argued with a sneer. "How

do we know but what this Black-Mask is the Big Boss hisself? Maybe he was making a play tuh fool us last night. 'Form vigilante committees!' he says. He'd be leadin' the vigilantes over to the west end of the Flats while his bunch rustled all the beef off the east end. I'd trust a man like Dorgan a lot quicker than I would this masked hombre."

Wade soon turned back toward Morling. He'd gleaned all the information possible from Klein and it was little enough. The entire affair was rapidly becoming a tangled trail of cross-motives and mysteries. Here was Klein, a rancher, stirring up distrust of the stockmen's proven friend, Black-Mask. And Klein was only one of many contradictory figures.

Dorgan, for instance, nursed his deadly yearning and pretended to live only to finish his fight while in reality he rode at the head of the rustlers. Jud Godfrey, the banker, voiced concern over the rustlers' depredations while in his vaults reposed mortgages he could foreclose on ruined ranchers. Shaw endured the bullying of Metcalfe, yet continued to ride at the bully's side. And the sheriff, who had taken an oath to uphold law and order, did approximately nothing.

Who could sort out these enigmatical personalities and put them in their proper places? Wade wished he had Bart's penetrating mind. Or Prof. Westcott's. As quickly as opportunity allowed him time, he was going to look up that drunkard, he decided.

A visitor awaited Wade at the *Clarion* office. It was Shaw and the sight of the little man slumped in a chair gave him a surprise. Stirring himself to life at Wade's entrance, the rustler greeted him almost fervently.

"I've been aiming to come around and thank you for taking my part down at the Only Chance," he explained, "but I ain't never got around to it. The barkeep told me all about the scrap."

WADE found himself wondering, as he'd wondered the first day he'd laid eyes on Shaw, just how the fellow fitted into the picture. More than ever, now, Wade was impressed by the fact that Shaw didn't belong here. He didn't like Shaw for the cringing little man had proved himself a coward on both occasions when Wade had seen him. So he eyed the rustler with something that approached malevolence and his look seemed to drain Shaw's scanty stock of courage.

"Get this straight, Shaw," Wade told him. "I didn't tackle Steve Metcalfe because I like you. Far from it. By your own say-so that day in the Only Chance, you're linked with Steve in this rustling. I haven't any use for a rustler. I just didn't like Steve's tactics and if he'd been using them on a bronc, I'd have jumped him just as quick—maybe quicker."

"You don't know the whole story," Shaw whined. "I can't choose my company. I'll admit I ride with Metcalfe's bunch. They won't let me break away. That's what I was trying to do when Steve smashed me in the saloon."

"You can't quit them? That's a little lumpy to swallow."

"Listen, Mavity," Shaw edged closer, his eyes darting furtively about. "If I had a wad of dinero, I could get out of this country. You stake me and I'll give you a real story for your paper."

"Like what?" Wade asked suspiciously.

Shaw leered triumphantly. "The name of the Big Boss!" he announced with a dramatic flourish.

An epithet quivered on Wade's lips. He wanted to call Shaw a liar for he knew that no man, save one, knew the identity of the Big Boss. But Wade Mavity wasn't supposed to know even

that much about it. He laughed. "What are you trying to get away with? Can you prove your man?"

"For five thousand dollars," Shaw said.

"Five thousand dollars for a name?"

"This is on the square," Shaw insisted. "Only one man is supposed to know the leader. They meet at night. The Boss gives this feller the orders and he passes them on to us. I've found out where they meet and I've listened to them. Give me the money and I'll take you there. You'll be getting a lot for your dinero because your readers will be mighty surprised to learn who the Big Boss is and they'll get another surprise when you tell them who the Big Boss gives his orders to."

Wade winced. He'd be paying for two names when he already had one. But at that, he was fighting hard to keep his eagerness from showing. This was a stroke of luck he hadn't expected for if he could expose the Big Boss half of his job was over.

"You're on," he said. "Let's see this two-ring circus of yours. I'll pay you when you deliver the goods."

"There's a coulee five miles south of Morling," Shaw explained. "The ranchers call it Spring Coulee and anybody can steer you to it. I'll drop in here some day next week. That'll be a signal for you to meet me at the coulee at sundown. Bring the money along and I'll take you to what you want to see."

With the pact sealed, the little man jammed on his sombrero, scurried through the doorway. Wade sank into the chair Shaw had abandoned but the excitement that throbbed within him left him too restless of inactivity. Leaving the office he strolled down the street.

Several men greeted him as he tramped along, for he was becoming known about town. Everywhere people were gathered in little knots, talking earnestly, and the subject, when Wade chanced to overhear it, was always the same. The meeting of the previous evening had stirred all of them.

Acting on impulse, Wade turned into the sheriff's office. He was curious to know the lawman's reaction to Black-Mask's accusation of Dorgan. He found Vic Bohler seated behind his desk. Spread before the officer was a deck of cards which the sheriff manipulated in a slow-moving game of solitaire.

BOHLER didn't look up as Wade entered. For a long moment the newsman watched in silence.

"If you'd put that black ten on the jack of diamonds you'd uncover quite a pile of cards," Wade finally suggested.

The sheriff made the indicated move and spoke wearily. "If I ever get lost in the woods," he sighed, "I'll set down and play me a game of solitaire and—"

"And when some dang fool ups and tells me how to play, I'll ask him the way home," Wade finished for him.

"Used to be I could catch folks on that one," the lawman complained. "Now everybody has heard it before."

"Too bad," Wade commented, sarcasm edging his voice. "By the way, how's the investigation into Kemp's murder coming?"

"Slow, slow. Like I said, sometimes if a gent just sits, the truth comes to him. But it shore 'pears like the truth's bogged down somewheres this time."

"How about that gent I was telling you about?" Wade demanded. "The Eastern-looking fellow in the riding duds? He wouldn't happen to be a gent that's interested in buying up spreads hereabouts to turn them into dude ranches?"

"Shucks now, it's hard to say," the sheriff replied listlessly. "I been meaning to ask him, next time I see him,

what he was doing in that alley the night somebody dusted your top-hair. Likewise I'll ask him does he want to buy ranches. Anything else you figger you'd like to know, son?"

Wade shrugged angrily. Experience had already taught him that it was wasted time to try and pry anything out of Vic Bohler when the sheriff chose to be tight-mouthed. Dropping the one matter, Wade turned to another.

"Did you attend the meeting last night?"

"Nope," the sheriff confessed. "It was a meeting for law-abiding folks, I was told, so I knew I wouldn't be needed. By the time I did get around, all the fuss was over."

"I hear Black-Mask is really back and he thinks I made a mistake in defending Dorgan in my paper," Wade went on. "Black-Mask claims that Dorgan is rustling again. What do you think about it?"

"There ain't no proof neither way," the sheriff observed. "Your paper says Dorgan's reformed. Black-Mask says he ain't. Who's a body gonna believe? Me, I figger you're right when you say Dorgan's earned another chance. Besides, he might be a big help around here. I always say it takes a thief to catch a thief. Figgerin that way, I swore Trigger Dan in as my deputy this morning."

CHAPTER XIV

"COWARD!"

AT FIRST Wade could only stare, for the full import of Vic Bohler's announcement left him speechless. It was like learning that a mountain lion had been turned loose in a corral filled with prize beef.

"You made Dorgan a deputy?" he finally demanded and incredulity made his voice unreal.

"Shore," the sheriff replied. "Yore own paper said he'd reformed."

Wade turned on his heel and left the office. He thought he heard the sheriff chuckle as he departed. Gritting his teeth, Wade strode down the street. He had to get away before he tossed caution to the winds and told the sheriff a few startling truths about his new deputy.

With grim-set jaw, Wade walked into his own office. At his first meeting with Vic Bohler he'd decided that the man was either a hopeless fool or in the pay of the Big Boss. And because Bohler certainly wasn't a fool, there was only one explanation for the lawman's move.

And one thing was obvious now. If Wade was to continue as Black-Mask he was going to have to completely submerge his real personality and become, outwardly, the most harmless, inoffensive person in Morling. The Big Boss had firmly controlled the situation before. Now his right hand was a lawman, legally authorized. It proved that the Big Boss had limitless powers. It would be flirting with death to continue a crusade against him in print. The job was for Black-Mask, alone.

With this thought in mind, Wade spent the next few days revising the copy for his forthcoming paper. Wherever a phrase was meant to inspire the ranchers to action, that phrase was altered. If a sentence hinted that the sheriff should be replaced, he erased it. He had written an account of the ranchers' meeting, designed to be a rousing, enthusiastic treaties on the action-inspiring talk of the night rider. Now it became a matter-of-fact unprejudiced retelling of the occurrence.

The job was not to Wade's liking. He

consoled himself with the thought that very soon he would strike another blow as Black-Mask. Already his doings in that guise were bearing fruit for as the days went by, he learned that the ranchers were seriously considering his suggestions made at the meeting. Night riding posses were being organized.

Judy had displayed a dislike for the paper's defense of Trigger Dan. Now that Wade had decided to entirely cease his outward belligerency toward the lawless element, he found himself wondering what the girl's attitude would now be. Dwelling on the matter, he became more and more concerned. Insuring the safety of Wade Mavity, editor, meant he could carry on as Black-Mask. But if it caused Judy to believe he'd lost his courage, it was a high price to pay.

He noticed that Dorgan bore the duties of a deputy lightly. The gunman swaggered up and down Morling's street, his star well in evidence. If there were less brawls in the saloons and fewer fights in the streets, the people attributed the change to the new lawman. And Wade, knowing just how simple it was for Dorgan to curb the ruffians when they chose to visit town, had to grin at the irony of it.

Wade waited impatiently for the return of Shaw but another paper was issued and still the little rustler had not made his appearance. The identification of the Big Boss would be Wade's supreme ace-in-the-hole. He was eager for the rendezvous that would give him a glimpse of that phantom leader.

The afternoon after the publication of the latest paper found Wade with time on his hands. He usually took advantage of such opportunities to ride out on the prairie for gun practice but the idea did not appeal to him today. The sun poured down a glaring yellow deluge and the little office became insufferable. Calling Craft, Wade told his helper he intended visiting the Crippled X, then swung into a saddle.

BOTH Mev Wynne and his daughter were home to greet Wade when he arrived at the ranch-house. Wynne immediately launched into a discussion of the stockmen's meeting. "Hear tell you didn't get there," he said.

"I couldn't make it," Wade lied. "My horse ran away on me that afternoon and I had to walk back to town. Seems like I missed plenty of excitement."

They stood before the ranch-house, keeping well in the shade of the building. Judy had lapsed into silence after greeting Wade and that young man had been watching her covertly while he listened to her father. Now he saw speech quivering on her lips.

"I was hoping so much that you'd be there to speak," she said, her eyes fixed on the sun-drenched vista. "Or have you lost all interest in the ranchers' fight? Today's paper didn't have much to say about it."

It was just as he'd feared. She did resent the change in his paper's attitude. The sting of her speech left him groping for words but Mev jumped into the widening gap. "Shore, now, honey," he said soothingly, "Wade knows his own job. Seems to me he's done a powerful lot already for an outsider. The meeting was his idea in the first place."

Judy's eyes became twin pools of contrition. "I'm sorry," she confessed. "Don't pay any attention to me. The way things have been going, I'm all on edge."

Her apology warmed him but he still felt ill at ease. "I guess your wish about Black-Mask came true," he said to change the subject.

Her eyes lighted approvingly. "Wasn't it grand, the way he defended Dad!" she exclaimed. "And the way he refused to fight Dorgan! That took

more courage than going for a gun."

Mev Wynne gave his belt a hitch and made a move toward the gate. "You young folks sit down and talk it over," he suggested. "I gotta little riding to do. Stay for supper, Mavity."

When he'd left, the couple found chairs on the gallery. Their conversation followed desultory paths and Wade began to feel heartily uncomfortable. He knew Judy might have regretted her hasty words. But the fact remained that he'd lost favor in her eyes and it irked him to realize that her opinion meant so much to him.

In one of the heavy moments of silence that seemed to punctuate their speech, Wade gazed across the shimmering distance that spread before them. Out there a dust speck, far across the plain, was growing larger, shaping itself into a mounted man spurring furiously toward the Crippled X. "Look!" he cried. Not far behind was a second rider in hot pursuit.

Man and girl came to their feet. Closer raced the two dust clouds, always the same distance apart. There was something ominous about their haste and Wade found himself expecting to see gunsmoke spurt from the pursuing rider. Then he realized that the second man was too far behind for effective shooting with a six-gun.

The pursued drew nearer, became recognizable. Wade's eyes widened as he identified little Shaw. The diminutive rustler pounded up to the gate and threw himself from his foam-flecked mount. One glimpse of his face told that death was riding his trail. Shaw was terror-stricken.

"Mavity," he gasped. "You've got to help me. I—" His words trailed away as he sobbed for air. "They're gonna jail me—"

The newsman grasped him roughly by the shoulders. Judy came to his side, her face white with concern.

"Take it easy, man," Wade counseled. "Pull yourself together and tell us what's happened."

"Dorgan's after me," Shaw managed to blurt out. Wade, gazing across the prairie, saw that the second rider was indeed the deputy. "He's gonna arrest me," Shaw babbled on. "You know Krazy Klein of the Bar V Bar? He's disappeared. Him and me once had a pretty hot argument so now they say I was his only enemy and they got out a warrant. Your printer told me you were out here. I grabbed a bronc and burned leather . . ."

"What's this got to do with me?" Wade demanded.

"They say Klein never got home after the meeting the other night. They're accusing me of drygulching him on the way home. You can tell 'em different. You saw Klein the next day. Your printer told me so."

"That's right," Wade agreed. "Who put the charge against you? Bohler?"

"It weren't the sheriff. Vic's down in Great Falls visiting folks. Dorgan's acting sheriff . . ." Again his voice trailed away.

WADE turned to the girl. "Can you get some whiskey?" he asked.

Judy dashed toward the house. As she disappeared through the doorway, Shaw clutched Wade's shirt and whispered hoarsely. "They must've found out I was selling them out," he husked. "I was drunk the other day and talked too much. That's why they're framing me. Once they get me in jail, they'll never let me out alive. Dorgan's a rustler, Mavity. He's the only gent that's supposed to have seen the Big Boss. Save me, somehow, and I'll spill the whole story to you."

The girl returned with a flask and arrived just as Dorgan jerked his mount to a slithering stop before the trio. Disregarding the new deputy, Wade tipped

the bottle to Shaw's lips. Most of the whiskey ran down the little man's chin and onto his shirt front.

"I'm after that man," Dorgan stated tersely.

Judy looked up at him, her eyes filled with undisguised scorn. "You'll have to show a warrant before you'll take him off the Crippled X," she snapped. "We don't cater to ex-rustlers around here, even if they do tote a badge."

Dorgan smiled ironically, produced a folded piece of paper. "Times and people change, miss," he observed. "I reckon everything I do is legal these days."

"Listen, Dorgan," Wade cut in. "Shaw tells me he's wanted for dry-gulching a fellow by the name of Klein after the meeting the other night. I went out to Klein's place the next day to get the dope for my paper. The rancher was alive then."

"If I was you I wouldn't get myself heated up about it," Dorgan snapped back. "Suspicion of murder is the charge, Mavity. This hombre will face a jury and you can speak for him then."

Wade's stare matched the frigid glance of the gunhawk. "Are you sure he'll face a jury, Dorgan?" he asked.

Successive emotions had their way with Trigger Dan's face. "That sounds like an insinuation, Mavity," he retorted. "I owe you a favor for the write-ups your paper gave me. I'll overlook your words. But I'm taking this man in."

Shaw had lapsed into a lethargy upon Dorgan's arrival. If there was any fight in the little man, the presence of the famed gunhawk stamped out the spark. He listlessly climbed into the saddle of his jaded mount and together prisoner and captor turned toward Morling.

Judy's pretty face was grim as she watched them depart. She stared in silence till the riders receded in the distance, then swung upon Wade. "Follow them, please," she begged. "I don't trust that man, Dorgan. Won't you go and see what you can do?"

Which was Wade's exact intention so he reached for his sombrero. "Sure, I will," he said. "But it doesn't look like I can do much till the trial comes off."

Into the saddle, he too took the trail to Morling but he stayed on it only till he was out of sight of the Crippled X. If it were true that Shaw had been framed because of his treachery to the Big Boss, something would happen at the jail before sunup so that the little man's tongue would be silenced forever. There was going to be work for Black-Mask.

So Wade turned his horse toward the hideout. Getting a rope on the black mare, he led her behind his own mount and took the trail to town again. Skirting Morling cautiously, he sought and found the coulee where he'd hidden from Dorgan the night of the meeting. Black-Mask's garb was cached among the rocks. Here he staked out the black mare and then, circling back, he entered Morling by the regular trail and went at once to the *Clarion* office.

Craft was a source of information. Dorgan had left town again after locking Shaw in jail, the printer reported. The deputy had taken the trail to the northeast.

Seated at his desk, Wade assembled the information. Both Bohler and Dorgan were out of town. That meant the jail was unguarded. When darkness came, Black-Mask would find a means of freeing Shaw. Then, Wade decided, that little man was going to do some talking.

Loitering at his desk with pretended tasks, Wade was as impatient as a caged cougar. He longed for the coming of the protecting cloak of night to blanket his movements. It seemed an eternity

before the sun dipped behind the western peaks but at long last the hour had arrived. Wade was reaching for his sombrero when the door burst inward. Judy stood there, her hair disheveled, her face contorted with excitement.

"Wade!" she cried. "I'm so glad I found you. I just had to come to town to find out what had happened. There's a big crowd of masked men gathering down by the jail! They're going to lynch Shaw!"

WADE stared. Now he knew where Dorgan had ridden. It was all part of a diabolical plan of the Big Boss. Instead of disposing of Shaw in the quickest manner, they were toying with him in a cat-and-mouse game. First the farcial arrest; now a lynching by his own comrades. Dorgan had gone to summon them. Wade, glancing vacantly at the girl, could visualize it all.

"Won't you do something to help him," Judy pleaded. "I know everybody says he's one of the rustlers but there is something queer behind it all. And we can't stand by and see him lynched."

Wade opened his mouth, closed it again. How could he interfere as himself? How could he tell Judy of the plans of Black-Mask? He knew what she must be thinking about him, yet he could say no word to change that opinion.

She stamped her foot angrily, the Wynne temper flashing in her eyes. "I can't figure you out, Wade," she stated bluntly. "When I met you, I felt that at last a fighting man had come to the Flats. At first you seemed to live up to my opinion. You came out to our ranch and talked Dad into calling a cattlemen's meeting but when the meeting came off, you weren't even there! Your paper started out by shouting 'fight!' The second issue defended Dorgan and today's quieted down to nothing. I hate to say it, Wade, but it looks like all you're good for is—is words. Now will you—or won't you—help Shaw?"

"Well, Judy, it kind of isn't any of my affair . . ." he began lamely.

The look she flashed him was devastating, withering. He knew she loathed him and with that knowledge he suddenly knew why he wanted to stand high in her eyes, more than anything in the world. He loved her. The truth of it came to him as easily as that.

Then Judy was stepping toward the door. "Coward!" she flung back and vanished into the night.

CHAPTER XV

A Six-Gun Speaks

THE gathering shadows were no darker than Wade's thoughts as he hurried through the gloom to the spot where he'd tethered the black mare. The dangers that might lie ahead were forgotten. He loved Judy and the girl detested him! The bitterness of that rode him to the exclusion of all else. And whetted a determination to defeat the machinations of the Big Boss this very night. He had to bring this fight to its finish for it was costing him the respect of the girl he loved.

Masked men were gathering to lynch Shaw! Judy hadn't been mistaken about that, for Wade spied a silent group before the jail-house as he left town. Even now as he donned the regalia of Black-Mask, they might be storming the place, dragging the little traitor to his doom. And though Wade

had no use for the double-crosser he intended to save Shaw if it were humanly possible. The little man held the key to the entire situation—if he could be made to talk. Wade Mavity would have had to pay five thousand dollars for a secret. Black-Mask had cheaper ways.

Into the saddle, Wade wheeled the mare toward Morling. Darkness blanketed the prairie. Neither moon nor stars were visible for scudding black clouds masked the heavens. Guided by the flickering lights ahead, Black-Mask reached the outskirts, turned into the street. Heedless of recognition, he galloped to the jail-house, a little wooden building next to the new courthouse. A splintered door hung on one hinge—mute evidence that he was too late.

Excited onlookers clustered about the ravaged jail. These were not the men he sought so Black-Mask, ignoring their startled outcries, headed from the town. If the masked rustlers intended to carry out their pretense of a lynching, they would head for trees. A clump of cottonwoods standing at the bottom of a little hill west of town were the closest. Thundering away in that direction, Wade soon knew he was on the right trail. Even his untrained eyes could detect that many riders had passed this way.

Minutes would count now. A picture of the scene that might lie ahead flashed through his mind. Shaw, his face pasty with terror, seated upon a horse—the group of riders surrounding him—the noose tossed over a limb—the flick of a quirt that would send Shaw's mount from under him—the grim dance of death. . . .

Gaining the top of the hill overlooking the clump of cottonwoods, Wade paused uncertainly. A rift in the hooded sky exposed a phantom moon to send feeble light upon the first stage of the very scene he'd pictured. Black-Mask's eyes were becoming accustomed to the gloom and he was almost certain that he recognized Metcalfe's stocky form and the bulk of Dorgan among the masked group below. Almost a dozen riders surrounded Shaw who sat his horse, hands trussed behind him. Voices drifted from the group.

"Let's get this over with," someone rasped. "Where's the rope?"

Black-Mask cast his eyes about desperately. At the crest of the hill stood a large boulder, fully five feet in diameter and almost round, deposited ages ago by the restless hand of some prehistoric glacier. Goaded by a sudden inspiration, Wade hurried over to it and swung from his saddle.

It would be suicidal to attempt, single-handed, to take Shaw from the lynchers. But if he could only start this boulder careening down the hillsides! The lynching party would vamoose in a hurry if that rock came crashing among them. Wade put his shoulder to it. Futile hope. The rock was lodged firmly and he could barely budge it.

Sweat, oozing from his forehead, trickled down his face, made his mask unbearable. Twisting the cloth aside, he gazed about feverishly. The stock of a rifle jutted from the saddle sheath. Jerking out the gun, he pried frantically and succeeded in getting the stout oak stock beneath the boulder. Grasping the barrel in both hands, heedless of the fact that he was using a loaded gun as a lever, he commenced to lift upward. Slowly, ever so slowly, the barrel elevated and just as slowly, the big rock began to move forward inch by inch.

PAUSING, he gazed below. A cloud was beginning to obscure the moon but there was light to silver the rope which had been tossed over a limb. A masked figure was moving to adjust the

noose around the little man's neck. Putting all his strength into one final effort, Wade forced the rifle still further beneath the boulder and tugged upward. The rock wavered uncertainly, commenced rolling. Over the lip of the hill and down the slope it plunged, gathering momentum rapidly.

Wade wasted no time contemplating his handiwork. Instead he thrust the rifle back into its scabbard, adjusted his mask, threw himself astride the mare and plunged recklessly down the hillside. In each hand a blazing six-gun cut orange streaks in the night.

"Gawd!" a rider bellowed. Then pandemonium burst loose below. Every man saw that plunging terror coming straight toward himself and every man was suddenly actuated by a desire to be some place else. Spurs raked flanks. Shouts and curses crackled in the night as a dozen riders raced away in as many different directions.

Like some live thing, the boulder struck the bottom of the hill, careened straight for the cottonwoods. Wade sucked in his breath. He'd taken a chance that the rock would miss Shaw but if it didn't, Black-Mask's efforts would be in vain. But luck held for Shaw's mount plunged to one side with a squeal of terror just as the boulder shot past.

The moon was completely veiled again and darkness had swallowed the would-be lynchers. But it would only take them a minute to gather their scattered wits. When panic had passed they'd realized only one rider had charged with the boulder and would return with questing guns. Leaning low, Black-Mask flanked Shaw's bolting horse, snatched the trailing reins. Wade didn't pause to untie Shaw. Instead he led Shaw's horse behind his own.

Shaw was apparently too astonished to speak. Only when they were well away from the cottonwoods did Wade pause to fumble in the darkness and untie Shaw's hands. Tossing the reins to the little man, he issued a curt order. "We're riding. South."

Voices grated through the gloom around them as the baffled rustlers tried to locate each other. Smiling grimly to himself, Black-Mask made his way quietly toward safety with Shaw at his heels.

Soon Wade felt safe to put his horse into a gallop. Shaw followed suit and both men raced silently through the night. Shaw was still tongueless, deprived of speech, perhaps, by the swift series of events that had taken him from the jail to the gallows tree and away again. Wade was saving speech until the appropriate place was reached. That place was already fixed in his mind.

Looping around Morling, Wade, still leading the way, turned north again and headed for the Sawtooths. Shaw broke silence.

"Where we heading?" he quavered.

"I reckon you remember the rustlers' hideout," Black-Mask snapped. "We're riding to that cabin."

Shaw's voice choked with terror. "Not there! The gang that holes up in that place is the same bunch that was going to string me up tonight!"

"I know it," Wade retorted. "That's why we're going there. They'll search the Frying Flats with a fine tooth comb but the last place they'll ever think of looking is their own hideout."

It was true, too. Dorgan's riders would pound leather this night, search every shadow, probe every possible place where Shaw and Black-Mask might be. Shaw had earned a death sentence for himself with his own loose tongue. Shaw, in the hands of Black-Mask, could spell doom for every lawless rider. They'd have to retake Shaw at any cost—and do it soon.

Shaw commenced whining. "Let's head for Pass Junction. I want to get out of this damn country. And I'm never coming back."

Wade chuckled mirthlessly. "You'll get to Pass Junction—later. First we're stopping and you're going to tell me a few things."

"I'll tell you anything," Shaw promised eagerly. "Let's talk as we ride and let's ride for Pass Junction."

"Shut up!" Wade ordered. "How can we talk? The wind slaps half your words back into your mouth. We're going to light and set a spell—in the rustler's hideout. And then you're going to talk."

SHAW must have sensed that argument was useless for he subsided. Together they unreeled the miles and soon reached one of the ravines that led to the cabin. Wade, approaching cautiously, found the place empty. With their horses hidden in the trees well behind the cabin, they entered. Black-Mask, fumbling for the lamp, found it dry so ignited a stub of candle. This brought another protest from Shaw.

"For gawd's sake don't have a glim," he begged. His face in the candlelight was chalky, strained. He trembled piteously.

"Sit down, Shaw," Black-Mask ordered. "Don't get boogered. If we're going to be caught, a light won't make any difference. It can't be seen beyond this pocket of hills and if anybody should ride up we'd be in the same tight, light or no."

Shaw sank into a chair. Wade chose another, but with care. He seated himself in such a way that he faced the door, his back to the only window in the cabin. This was choosing the lesser of two evils. An approaching rustler would expect to find his own comrades and would enter through the door. That rustler would meet with a surprise, Wade decided. He faced Shaw across the table.

"Listen to me, Shaw," he commanded. "I ain't got time to waste words. I saved you for just one reason—to hear you talk. I haven't any use for you and if it wasn't for what you could tell me, I'd just as soon help string you up."

It was just the sort of lurid threat to impress this arrant coward and the panic in Shaw's eyes instantly told Wade that it had produced the desired effect. "Here's the cards," Wade continued. "You tell me what I want to know and I'll help you get to Pass Junction. But remember, no lies! I want truths and proofs for them."

"I'll give you truths," Shaw agreed eagerly. "I've been on the inside, savvy. Most of the bunch just ride for the Boss and take their orders from Dorgan. Me, I was sent for to do a special job. Everybody thinks the rustlers are out to snatch all the beef on the Flats. Hell, that's pin money. The Big Boss is after stakes bigger than that. He figures on being able to buy every ranch on the Flats afore winter. That's what he wants. The more rustlin', the more willing the ranchers'll be to sell."

"Have you really seen the Big Boss?" Wade demanded. "Remember, the truth now! I know that none of the bunch is supposed to have seen him, except Dorgan."

"I've seen him," Shaw insisted. "Just lately. I worked for him a long time through paper. I know it sounds loco, but that's the way he used to do business. Cached notes for his men with orders. Now he's got Dorgan for a segundo and gives orders through him. They meet on the prairie and the Boss tells Dorgan what to do and how to do it. He's a smart hombre, the Boss."

This was identical to the story Shaw had told Wade Mavity whom the little man knew as an entirely different person than Black-Mask. Shaw was telling the truth! Wade leaned forward eagerly.

"Very well, Shaw," he rasped. "I believe you. I've always figgered you didn't belong on the range and were tied up with the bunch for some special reason. Now I want to know two things—who is the Big Boss and what is he after?"

"He—" Shaw began and stopped, mouth agape. Horror spreading across his face, he aimed a shaking finger at the window behind Wade's back. "The Big Boss!" he shrieked.

Just as a man jerks his finger from the heated top of a stove before he actually feels the burn, so Black-Mask acted before the full import of Shaw's terror-stricken words seeped into his consciousness. His darting hand snuffed the candle. But in that split-second between flickering light and complete darkness, a reverberating roar filled the little room as a gun belched through the window.

And Wade knew instinctively that the bullet had found the target for which it was intended. Shaw's lips were sealed forever.

CHAPTER XVI

The Lawless Strike

WITH the cabin's walls echoing gun thunder, Wade hurled himself to the floor, clawing for his gun as he dropped. The Big Boss was out there! The man's six-shooter spoke again as Wade triggered in turn and then Wade was rolling across the floor, shooting, rolling to a new position. It was this strategy that saved him. The Big Boss was displaying uncanny marksmanship, noting every gunflash, seeking out the spot with raking lead. Bullets drove splinters from the floor, geysered dust into Wade's eyes. He held his fire, ears strained for a betraying movement on the other's part.

Thick, acrid smoke fogged the room, brought tears to Wade's eyes. Had the Big Boss fired the cabin? Someone was thrashing through the bushes outside. More rustlers? Wade gripped his gun, eased himself to his feet. But the hammer of retreating hoofs told him the Big Boss, fleeing, had made the commotion.

One bound took Wade to the cabin door and he flung it open. But there, with the urge upon him to pursue his unknown assailant, he had to hesitate. Was Shaw dead? Had the bullet found its mark before the candle winked out? He didn't know, but because there was a chance that life remained in the little traitor, Wade had to turn back. He couldn't leave Shaw to bleed to death.

But Shaw was beyond mortal help. Reluctantly turning back into the cabin, Wade found the candle, got it aglow. Shaw lay slumped on the floor, his legs twisted beneath him, one arm hiding his face. Wade straightened the body. Lead had struck Shaw squarely between the eyes. The man's face was twisted with terror for he'd died as he'd lived—afraid.

Wade left the body where it lay. He might have buried Shaw for it was the least he could do, but that chore would have to be done by the rustlers. For rustlers would be coming now, summoned by their chief who was probably looking for his legion this very minute. And, astride his horse, Wade faced a poser as he thought of the fleeing Boss. Which of the ravines had swallowed the

man? The moon still hid its face and matches proved useless in attempting to find the trail. The mouths of all the ravines were criss-crossed by the tracks of countless hoofs for the Boss' Bunch had come this way often and rode in from every direction.

With a feeling of frustration and anger, Wade gave up the affair as a bad night's work and started for town. On level ground he kept a sharp lookout for riders and turned aside once to skirt a shadowy group heading for the hills. They might have been the lynching party he'd eluded earlier. It didn't matter.

He'd saved Shaw, forced that man to talk, almost pried the Boss' identity from him. Then Shaw had died. He'd swapped lead with the Big Boss, come to actual grips with the outlaw leader for the first time. Then the Boss had fled where none could follow. Disgust was Wade's bedmate that night and disgust clouded his dreams and was with him when he awoke at the pressure of a hand upon his shoulder and opened his eyes to find Buck shaking him vigorously.

"For a newsman," Buck complained, "yuh're a regular Rip Van Winkle. Everytime somethin's goin' on, yuh're asleep or missing."

"What's up?" Wade demanded and slipped into his trousers.

"Lynchin' and murderin'!" Buck spat. "Didn't yuh know Shaw was snatched from jail last night, almost strung up?"

"Judy told me," Wade replied and winced, remembering what else the girl had said. "I wasn't interested," he added acidly. "I'm not the sheriff."

"Wa-al, Black-Mask took Shaw away from the mob," Buck announced. "Yuh didn't know that, did yuh?"

Wade was wide awake instantly. Of course he knew—he'd been there! But how the devil did Buck know?

"It's town talk," Buck explained in answer to Wade's startled question. "There was a drunk in the Only Chance, a grubliner, looked like. He talked like he might 'a' been one of the lynchers only he was plumb careful to let on like he heard the yarn from somebody else. Rustlers ain't so welcome around here since the boys got riled up at the meetin'. Anyhow, this gent ups and announces that Black-Mask took Shaw away from the necktie party, then murdered the little jasper hisself."

"That's a lie!" Wade exploded and then, seeing the shape of suspicion in Buck's eyes, added: It must be a lie."

"Don't sound sensible, does it," Buck agreed. "It's true all the same. Dorgan picked a posse and went out to cut sign. They brung in Shaw's body this mornin'. They found the galoot stretched out on the prairie. He'd been killed at close range by a forty-five slug."

WADE was suddenly glad that there were ablutions to be performed at the wash-stand. He wanted time to drive the cobwebs of sleep from his mind— time to think. Shaw had been found on the prairie. That meant Shaw had been moved, that Shaw, dead, was still a pawn in the game. What had the rustlers hoped to gain by this move?

"If Black-Mask snatched Shaw from the lynchers, he must have done it to save him," Wade remarked from a towel's folds. "Why should he have killed him afterwards?"

Buck's brown face knotted. "That's what a lot of folks would like tuh know. People are kinda curious as to how Black-Mask fits in the pitcher, so's to speak. Looks like he's playin' some kind of lone-wolf game and murder is one of his sleeve-cards."

Wade snorted.

"Anyway, Shaw's dead an' all over a mistake," Buck went on. "Klein wasn't murdered a-tall. He's here in town right now."

Wade wasn't surprised. From the first he'd guessed that the charges against Shaw were trumped up. And Wade, himself, had played into the hands of the Big Boss. The outlaw leader had eliminated the traitor and at the same time branded Black-Mask as a killer. Some of the ranchers would doubt the justice-rider's motives from now on. Just how telling that blow might be, only time could reveal.

Klein was one of the rustler bunch. Wade was almost certain of that now. When he left Buck behind and went to get breakfast, he found the ferret-eyed rancher decorating a stool in the eating place so Wade chose a stool next to the man. Klein grinned a snaggle-toothed grin at him.

"Just heard I was supposed to be dead," Klein remarked. "Figgered I'd ride in 'fore the boys started buyin' flowers."

"Man alive!" Wade exclaimed. "Don't you know Shaw was killed over the deal? Where the devil were you?"

"Just visitin'," Klein said vaguely and shrugged. "Can't a man leave his spread without somebody gettin' jailed over it?"

Wade wanted to hit him. He wanted to knock Klein from the stool and over the counter. But because such a move would have betrayed his suspicions, Wade wrapped his fist around a fork instead and deliberately shifted the subject.

"There's something I want to ask you," he said. "I've heard that some representative of an Eastern syndicate is anxious to buy up spreads around the Flats for dude ranches. Is that true? I've got a ranch myself, you know."

"Sure, it's true," Klein replied quickly. "Fellow name of Greg Decker has been out here for quite a spell lookin' at some places. I got a letter from him. Seems right anxious to buy, too."

"Thanks. I might look him up."

"If yuh really want to sell, I can get yuh a buyer that'll offer more than the Easterner will," Klein interjected eagerly. "The gents I' thinkin' about 'll pay a helluva lot more than this Eastern concern."

"I'll think it over," Wade promised. "If I sell, I'll look you up first."

But here was a fresh piece for the puzzle. How did this Eastern syndicate fit in? Shaw had admitted that the Big Boss aimed to control the Flats. Was this Syndicate a myth, created by the Big Boss in order to buy up ranches dirt cheap once rustlers had made the ranchers eager to sell? If this were true, then why was Klein trying to steer him, Wade, away from the Syndicate buyer?

WADE didn't know. He was framing another question when the restaurant door banged and Buck charged inside. And Wade, seeing that explosive entry, tingled with the premonition that some desperate urgency had sent Buck here. The proof of it was in the cowboy's eyes, in the drawn lines of his grim mouth.

"Wade!" he barked. "Hell's busted loose!"

"Tell me!" Wade demanded.

"Mev Wynne's been kidnapped," the cowboy gasped. "A Crippled X rider just fogged into town, lookin' for the law. Them same masked skunks that snatched Shaw last night run across Mev and one of his hands riding alone near midnight. They slung some lead, wounded the waddy and packed old Mev off. The cowprod crawled home with the news. The Crippled X is shore rarin' to ride to war. Every man they got is on the trail and they

need more!"

Wade sank his fingers into Buck's arm. "Ride and help 'em, Buck," he ordered. "Forget we've got a ranch. You savvy that?"

Buck grinned. "I figgered you'd say that, boss, but I honed to have orders." He went through the door like triggered lead and flung himself upon his waiting horse.

Wade shoved his untouched coffee aside. For Wade was cold with a realization that the lawless had struck—and struck hard. What was it Shaw had said? ". . . The Big Boss is after stakes bigger than that . . . He figures on being able to buy every ranch . . ."

Mev Wynne was the greatest stumbling block to such an ambition. Mev Wynne would never relinquish the Crippled X. But with Mev Wynne a prisoner in the Boss' hands, the lawless held the winning cards. They could starve him, torture him, force him to sign over the Crippled X. Once they had tried to kidnap Judy. Now they had captured her father.

Here was work for Black-Mask. For Wade Mavity would have wagered his entire holdings that Mev Wynne was being held at the hideout in the hills. At this very moment they were probably working on the old cattleman, bending him to their will. The minutes might count.

With a pretended coolness he was far from feeling, Wade spun a coin upon the counter, nodded to Klein, jammed on his sombrero and strode toward the door. And there he almost collided with a stocky figure who bulked in the entrance, blocked his way.

"What's yore hurry, younker?" the man grated and Wade found himself looking into the leering face of Steve Metcalfe. "This is the first chance I've had to look you up," the rustler growled. "Yuh and me is goin' to finish that little fracas we started down in the Only Chance. Yuh savvy? We're goin' to finish it right here and now!"

CHAPTER XVII

Death Warrant

WADE had been wildly eager to be into the saddle, off to the assistance of Mev Wynne. But now as Steve Metcalfe raised an arm to bar his progress, something snapped inside the newsman. And suddenly nothing mattered except that he had to fight Metcalfe.

In the battle against the rustlers, Wade had played a passive part for many days. As Wade Mavity, newspaperman, he hadn't dared draw attention to himself. He'd chafed under the yoke of seeming peacefulness. So Steve Metcalfe, growling his challenge, personified the whole evil force Wade had come to hate. He couldn't fight that force openly. But the issue between himself and Metcalfe was a personal one. And Wade found himself trembling with anticipation for here was a chance to release part of his pent-up hatred.

"I'm ready for you, Steve!" he snapped and shoved the man aside. "Now!"

Wordlessly Metcalfe backed out into the dust of the street. Wordlessly he discarded his coat, slowly unbuckled his gun belt. The girdle of cartridges and two filled holsters *plopped* to the ground. Wade aped the gesture, placing his own guns on the edge of the boardwalk. Then the two men were facing each other.

Metcalfe's usually somber face was split by a savage grin as the two warily

circled for an opening. Metcalfe was sure of his prowess and it was obvious that in his mind there was only one explanation for the thing that had happened in the Only Chance. Wade had been lucky that day. This was another day. With knotted fists flailing, Steve rushed.

Wade, expecting just such an attack, sidestepped. His smashing right caught Metcalfe just above the belt. Metcalfe grunted, wavered for a moment, then lunged forward. Again Wade lashed out, the blow cracking like a revolver shot as it landed on Metcalfe's cheek. The rustler sprawled in the dust.

He came to his feet at once, his eyes red-rimmed with anger. But he approached Wade warily for his wrath was tinged with caution. Metcalfe wasn't used to side-stepping and planned punches. His method was toe-to-toe slugging where the best slugger won. Now he watched Wade closely, but not closely enough. With Metcalfe seeking an opening, Wade feinted with his left. The rustler instinctively dropped his arms to protect his body. Instantly Wade's right rammed into his face. Metcalfe, reeling backward, cursed, clawed at the air for support, spitting teeth and blood as he recovered his balance.

Dust shrouded the two men now, dust raised by shuffling boots. Drawn by the irresistible magnet of battle, a ring of men was rapidly forming. Spectators grew enthusiastic, shouting advice and encouragement at random. It warmed Wade to hear them and he grinned in their direction.

He paid for that moment's laxity. Metcalfe rushed again and this time Wade's arms only partly parried the blows. A lunging left grazed his shoulder, a hammering right made his ear a buzzing bedlam. Mechanically, he danced out of the way. Bellowing in triumph, Metcalfe followed up quickly —too quickly. Wade, stopping short, launched a dazzling rain of blows that sent Metcalfe sprawling again.

While Metcalfe picked himself up, Wade risked another glance at the crowd. Dorgan had joined the spectators, his snapping black eyes followng every move of the fight. Wade frowned. Was Dorgan here to stop the fight in his capacity as deputy?

He dragged his eyes away for Metcalfe was charging again. But Wade had found the key to the man's wild methods. He floored him again and again. Once Metcalfe drew blood from Wade's nose. Once he sent Wade reeling from a body blow. But these were small repraisals for the terrible punishment Metcalfe took. Dust from their flailing boots rose in choking clouds, blanketed the watchers. Once the crowd had been cheering and eager. Now a strange hush gripped the spectators for the fracas had ceased to be a fight. Steve Metcalfe was taking the worst beating of his life.

METCALFE was weakening. Wade's methodical fists hammered relentlessly. And Metcalfe, gathering all his remaining strength, concentrated it on one gigantic effort. Like a man renewed he rushed in, his head lowered bull-like. Wade straightened him with a body blow, leveled him with a smashing upper-cut.

Steve Metcalfe sprawled inertly in the dust. "A knockout!" someone whispered hoarsely. But it was no knockout for Metcalfe, shaking his head, painfully pulled himself to a sitting position. Hate was a live thing in his eyes. Wade, breathing heavily, stood with legs apart, eyeing the rustler.

But alert as he was, Wade wasn't prepared for Metcalfe's move. Profanity pouring from his battered lips, Metcalfe suddenly thrust a hand to-

ward an object in the dust. And triumph twisted his face as he snatched one of his six-guns from the discarded belt, leveled it at Wade.

"Let's see yuh dodge lead!" Metcalfe snarled.

The distance was short—too short for a miss. But the distance was too great for Wade to kick that gun away before Metcalfe triggered. So as a snake-charmed bird stands fascinated, so Wade stood, seeing death in the black depth of the gun barrel, seeing death in the tightening trigger finger. A dozen startled gasps, blending into one, told that the crowd stood as tense as he. Killer lust shone in Metcalfe's slitted eyes and the bark of a gun shattered the silence. Wade, braced for the impact of lead, witnessed the miracle. Metcalfe's gun slipped to the dust from nerveless fingers. Metcalfe, shuddering, sank lifeless to the ground.

Staggering, almost unnerved by the ordeal, Wade reeled toward the crowd. Then he understood. Dorgan was dropping a smoking forty-five into his holster. Dorgan had shot Steve Metcalfe just in time! Without a word the deputy turned and shouldered his way out of the awe-stricken crowd.

Instantly a ring of admiring men were around Wade. They led him to his office, seated him in a chair. Someone pulled Metcalfe's body to the side of the street. Conversation crackled everywhere but it didn't fasten on the fist fight. The crowd had witnessed a more wonderful event.

"I tell yuh his hand didn't move!" one leather-faced cowman insisted. "I stood right along side o' Dorgan. Dorgan didn't draw. He jist thought about drawin' and a gun was in his hand!"

The town blacksmith who had left his forge to witness the fight, wiped sweaty hands on his leather apron and shook his massive head. "I've seen gun-slinging in my time," he averred. "I've seen fast slinging. But I never saw a draw like that. Gawd help Black-Mask if Dorgan ever catches up with him."

And, listening, Wade couldn't help but wonder if he was hearing his own doom pronounced. One by one the men drifted out, still talking excitedly about Dorgan's gun-skill. When all had departed and a wagon carried off Metcalfe's body, Wade roused himself. Maybe he'd have to match that gun-wizardry someday. But Dorgan's day was still in the future and there was other work in the immediate present.

Slipping away, he headed for the coulee where he'd left the black mare and Black-Mask's garb the night before. Then he was heading for the Sawtooths. Now there was time for thinking and a riddle reared itself to keep him company. Why had Dorgan, a rustler, killed Metcalfe, a rustler, to save Wade Mavity, newspaperman? What vagary of Dorgan's mind had prompted the deputy to take a hand? Had he done it to save face when Metcalfe had gone berserk? Wade didn't know.

He'd wasted precious time in his fight with Metcalfe and his body ached from the exertion. Now he had to recapture those lost minutes and he gave his mount her head, thundered over the miles.. But nearing the rustler's hideout he had to swap haste for caution and he dismounted, approaching carefully. Metcalfe and Dorgan had been in town which proved that the full force of the Boss' Bunch weren't here but there might be enough to give him a hot-lead reception.

WORMING his way through chokecherry bushes, taking advantage of the scanty shelter of scrub pine and evergreen, he reached the cabin. And even his first glimpse told him his caution had been wasted effort. The cabin

was deserted. If Mev Wynne was still a prisoner, he'd been taken somewhere else.

Frowning, Wade slipped back to the mare. Did the rustlers have a second hideout? Or had the hard-riding hands of the Crippled X overtaken the kidnappers, rescued Wynne? There was one way to find out so Wade headed for the Wynne spread.

Loitering among the foothills, he waited for darkness. Yesterday he would have ridden boldly to the ranch-house door, for Black-Mask was a proven friend of the Wynnes. Today he doubted the temper of the Crippled X crew. Black-Mask had been branded a murderer, a lone-wolf playing a dubious game. Those cowpokes, already on the prod because of their boss' disappearance, might be in a humor to trust nobody.

So it wasn't until purple shadows crept among the foothills and the dying sun set the peaks aglow that he advanced upon the ranch-house. If Wynne were still missing, most of the riders would be out on the trail. But a few would be here to protect Judy if the girl was at home. Leaving his mount behind the blacksmith shop, Wade sneaked toward the house, a wary eye peeled for strolling cowpokes.

Friendly inviting light glowed in the windows of the living room, Silently vaulting the fence, Black-Mask eased forward. The windows were low to the ground and since the night was oppressively hot they were all open. Voices floated from within.

Removing his sombrero, Wade raised his eyes above a window ledge. Judy stood before the open mouth of the fireplace. Her face was wan and haggard, evidencing the ordeals of this day. There was something so forlorn about her that Wade might have ached to put his arms about her, comfort her. But even that instinctive reaction was submerged in his startled surprise as he saw, seated at a small table, a man.

There was no mistaking that handsome, smooth-shaven face or that faultless garb — polished boots, riding breeches, white silk shirt. This was the fellow Wade had fought in the alleyway behind the hotel his first night in Morling, the night someone had tried to bushwhack him. This was the Easterner, Greg Decker, who was rumored to be representing a syndicate bent upon buying ranches on the Flats. And this was his business here for his words proved it.

"Surely my proposition is not so distasteful, Miss Wynne," he was saying, his voice suave and ingratiating. "Of course it's too bad that your father should—er, disappear at such a time. But I think you'll agree that the opportunity I'm offering you will be appreciated by him upon his return."

"Oh, I wish he were here," Judy cried.

"But you won't be obligating yourself," the man said soothingly. "I have the option all prepared. Sign it and I'll give you a check for ten thousand dollars which will serve to pay the mortgage which is due tomorrow, you say. Then, inside sixty days, you can either return my money or sell me the Crippled X at the price we agreed upon. Considering your depleted herds, you must agree the price is fair. If your father returns meanwhile and does not wish to sell, you will be in the same position you were when he left. You will owe ten thousand dollars to me, rather than to the bank. You admit that Godfrey will not extend the mortgage beyond tomorrow. Sign this option and you gain an extra sixty days."

Black-Mask strained his ears. He had known Godfrey held a Crippled X mortgage but he hadn't known the banker intended to foreclose so soon. This was news. And, for the first time,

a suspicion struck Wade. Was Jud Godfrey the Big Boss? The banker held mortgages on many ranches, probably. Supposing he had instigated the large-scale rustling. Beef meant cash to the ranchers. With their herds stolen they would be easy prey. And Shaw had admitted that the Big Boss aimed to control the Flats.

If Godfrey was the brain behind the rustlers, Judy would unconsciously thwart his plans by accepting this Easterner's offer.

The girl moved toward the writing table. "I'll sign," she said and reached for a pen.

Decker smiled. "I must caution you in one respect, Miss Wynne," he interjected. "I hate to speak of such a probability but we must face facts. If it should develop that your father has been—er, seriously hurt, you'll have to return the option payment or sell at the figure we mentioned."

There was something in the way he said it that shot a thrill of apprehension through Wade. And it was in that instant that a phrase from Bart's letter flashed across his mind.

" . . . The Big Boss may be a stranger from afar . . ." his uncle had said.

With no conscious thought to prompt him, Black-Mask tossed a leg over the window sill, eased himself into the room. Two pairs of startled eyes lifted at his coming.

"Wait!" Black-Mask cried. "Hadn't you better think twice before you sign that paper? Maybe you're signing your father's death warrant!"

CHAPTER XVIII

Lennox Takes Cards

IF WADE'S spectacular entry into the Crippled X ranchhouse proved to be something of a bombshell, oddly enough it was the Easterner who recovered his composure first. There was uncertainty in Judy's face, evidencing that Black-Mask's words had struck home. But Greg Decker, recovering himself, smiled sardonically.

"This, I presume, is Black-Mask," he said. "I've heard plenty about you since I arrived in this section."

Wade bent in a mock bow.

"Well why in blazes are you stepping into my business?" the syndicate man snapped. "What do you mean by suggesting that Miss Wynne will be endangering her father's life by signing our option?"

Ignoring the questions, Black-Mask strode to the table, picked up the unsigned option and scanned it.

"This thing looks all right, Miss Wynne," he commented. "But if this galoot should happen to be the Big Boss, he'd soon arrange that your father never came back to bust up his play."

He expected the Easterner to blaze into wrath but, instead, Decker laughed contemptuously. "If *I* should happen to be the Big Boss." he echoed. "That's good—coming from a man who masks his own face and motives."

Wade stiffened. This man was hinting at the mysterious death of Shaw but nothing could be gained by argument. "I haven't any more proof against this gent than he has against me," he admitted to Judy. "Just the same, I think you'd do well to raise the mortgage money some other way."

Bewildered, the girl shrugged. "Perhaps you're right," she said. "But who can I turn to? None of the ranchers can help. Most of them are in the same tight."

Decker's voice was edged with sarcasm. "Do you usually allow masked bandits to advise you?" he sneered.

Judy stiffened. "Black-Mask has proved himself a friend of the Wynnes many times, both in the past and recently. I'll listen to him."

Warmed by her loyalty, Wade went on. "You've got till tomorrow night to save the ranch. Try and get the money from someone you know a little better than this jasper." He eyed Decker. "If this gent is on the level, he'll still be willing to offer you the same option tomorrow night, if you can't raise the money some place else."

"If I only knew who to go to," she cried.

"What about Mavity?" Black-Mask suggested. "He's got some money. See him."

Instantly he regretted the suggestion for Judy's lip tightened. "I think I'd rather let Godfrey foreclose," she flared.

Black-Mask forced a chuckle. "Think it over," was his counsel. Gliding to the window, he slipped out and was gone. Afterwards, when he was mounted, he waited a short distance from the ranch.

He'd convinced Judy that it was best to try other methods before placing the ranch in the hands of this unknown Easterner. He'd checkmated Decker, it seemed, but he wanted to be sure. Not long afterwards he saw Decker mount a chestnut sorrel that waited at the gate. There hadn't been time for the Easterner to have changed the girl's mind.

Satisfied, Black-Mask headed toward Morling. Mev Wynne was still missing but the trail had grown cold. There was nothing Black-Mask could do about that until the sign was right but meanwhile there was the matter of Judy and the mortgage to be considered. Since that matter was tied-in with the disappearance of Wynne it was worth immediate attention.

Wade toyed with the idea of offering money to Judy in the guise of the night rider. But some stubbornness in him whispered to wait. He'd planted a thought in the girl's mind this night. Perhaps Judy might come to him, as Wade Mavity, for help after all. And, knowing the girl, he knew such a move on her part would only mean that she had regretted the vitrolic words she had heaped upon him.

It was a hope, and early next morning it looked like a triumphant certainty. From the window of the *Clarion's* office, he saw Judy ride up the street, tie her horse across the way. She was coming in to see him after all! She was coming to ask his help! Wade's heart pounded.

BUT pride preceded the fall. Without a glance at Wade's establishment, Judy turned into the building opposite, the building which housed the professional men of the town. Wade, feeling very foolish, watched her trim figure disappear from view.

Only a very few minutes later she reappeared and with her was Phineas Lennox. Side by side the girl and the lawyer swung down the street together, an attractive couple, the lawyer hatless, his leonine mane glinting in the morning sunlight, the girl so queen-like. Wade's disappointment turned to a burning curiosity. It was only partly satisfied when the two turned into the Stockmen's Bank.

Phineas Lennox. . . . After that first fateful meeting, Wade had scarcely seen the lawyer. Wade's many activities had given him no time to renew

the acquaintance and since Lennox confined himself to his office or his bungalow at the end of the street, Wade had almost forgotten the lawyer's existence. He hadn't even thought of Lennox the night before. But maybe Lennox could find a legal loophole to forestall Godfrey. Judy herself, it seemed, had thought of the one man who could serve her.

Not more than twenty minutes later Wade saw the couple return to the street. Jud Godfrey accompanied them to the bank's door. Even from the distance Wade could see the banker's expression and it was obvious that Godfrey was not pleased with the new trend of events.

Had Lennox found a way to loosen the banker's grip? When Judy had swung into the saddle, galloped from town, Wade decided to find out. Crossing the street, he climbed the stairs to Lennox's office where he found the lawyer seated behind his littered desk.

Lennox rose and extended a hand. "I was beginning to believe you'd developed a grudge against me," he complained. "I've seen so little of you."

"I've been busy," Wade apologized. Dropping into a proffered chair he ran his eyes from the low railing to the portrait of the Emancipator. "The paper takes up a lot of time."

The lawyer's vigorous eyes snapped enthusiastically. "I've been reading your paper quite religiously. I almost came over to see you after the first issue."

Wade grinned. "To compliment or to kick?"

"Neither," the lawyer replied with a shake of his silvery head. "To advise. You seemed to be inviting trouble for yourself at the start. I'm glad to see that the tone of your sheet has changed."

"Judy wasn't so glad," Wade blurted out. "She thought I'd turned coward."

The lawyer smiled sadly. "Judy is young, and the young are prone to worship action. When she has my years she will develop the philosophy of peace that guided your uncle and me. I am glad to see that you do not cater to belligerency although—" a smile creased his thin lips—"I couldn't help but see your handiwork yesterday morning when you thrashed that bullying rustler."

"I'm not blaming Judy," Wade countered. "She has troubles enough to upset her with her dad missing and a mortgage hanging over her head."

He hadn't planned a trap to turn Lennox to the thing that had brought him, Wade, here but the lawyer automatically swung to this new theme. "I was able to abolish one of her troubles," he said. "I bought the Crippled X mortgage from Godfrey this morning."

"You did!"

"Mev Wynne is an old friend," the lawyer explained. "I was Judy's godfather. I hadn't known of their trouble until she came to me. I welcomed the opportunity to lend her the money for I would trust the Wynnes anytime. But Judy insisted that a new mortgage be drawn up. But it's a blank mortgage and it isn't filed. I'm not a Shylock—to my friends."

"The Wynnes and the Mavity's are lucky to have such a friend," Wade said sincerely and, since the matter was closed, his own words swung his mind into another track. "Speaking of friends, did you know a friend of Bart's by the name of Prof. Westcott?"

THE lawyer's face darkened. "I knew the professor quite well, but I haven't seen him of late. I'd leave Westcott strictly alone, son. Bart put quite a store in him but I think he was blinded by the man's learning. West-

cott is gifted but I believe he is without scruples of any sort. He's more of a mental machine than a man."

"I heard the same criticism from another," Wade remarked, recalling Mev Wynne's words. Another question came to him, a question that had been in the recesses of his mind since he'd swapped bullets with the Big Boss, sensed the man's uncanny gun wizardry. "By the way, I've sometimes thought that I ought to familiarize myself with the six-gun," he said. "Who'd be a good tutor? Who are the real marksmen around here?"

"In Morling, you mean? Why Dorgan is undisputedly the best, of course, but I presume you'd want little to do with him. But there are others. We once had a target club in town and it developed some real talent. Vic Bohler's a mighty good shot. And Jud Godfrey is superb, although you wouldn't imagine it to be so. . . ."

"And the best . . .?" Wade prompted. "Outside of Dorgan, of course."

Lennox looked embarrassed. "Well, I'm afraid I'll have to admit that I was the star of our club. Of course, I'm not in the class of Trigger Dan and there are undoubtedly many men on the range who could outshine me. And speaking of Dorgan, tell me Wade; why did you defend Dorgan in your paper?"

"Because I thought he'd earned another chance."

Lennox shook his head. "Perhaps you are right. I find it hard to accept the man even though Bohler has seen fit to make him a deputy. I was here when Dorgan rode range in the old days. Can the leopard change its spots?"

"I don't know," Wade confessed. "In any case, he saved my life yesterday."

"Men have reformed before," Lennox admitted. "Dorgan has been working hard since Mev Wynne disappeared. And I hear he's organizing a bigger posse today. He learned, somehow, that the rustlers plan a gigantic raid in the south country tonight. He's going to lead half a hundred men down there to guard the cattle."

Wade nodded. But as he left to descend the stairs he seethed inwardly as he sorted the information he'd received. There were two new jobs for Black-Mask now.

Phineas Lennox would have to be protected. Unconsciously Lennox had circumvented the Big Boss by gaining control of the Crippled X. And Lennox had a blank mortgage in his office, a mortgage signed by Judy, a mortgage that would put any possessor in control of the ranch. That mortgage would be a lure to draw the lawless. Lennox had spoken to him about it. Lennox might speak to others, others who would carry the word to the ears of the lawless.

And the second job demanded more immediate attention. Dorgan was organizing a posse to guard the country south of Morling. That meant just one thing. The Boss' Bunch was going to strike *north* of Morling this very night.

And Black-Mask would be there.

CHAPTER XIX

VICTORY

THUNDER echoed dimly in the mountain maze. Here where five hundred head of cattle followed the tortuous windings of a ravine deep in the Sawtooths, fifteen mounted shadow shapes guided them northward, the rumble of hoofs

drowning all else. Thick growths of trees, flanking the narrow pathway, intensified the gloom of the moonless night.

It was an epic raid. With Dorgan leading a posse south of Morling, rustlers, had swooped down on the northern ranches. Many cattlemen had already started their fall roundups, vainly hoping to realize something on their beef before the rustlers had it all. Cows, calves and yearlings had been cut out and turned away from the prime beef. The rustlers had garnered marketable stuff merely by besting the few punchers left on hand to guard the herds. The bulk of the Flats' fighting men were far away, riding with Trigger Dan.

Now the rustlers were deep in the hills, heading for a rendezvous with a buyer who would, in turn, drive the stolen herd on to a dubious market. In high elation the rustlers rode. But Nemesis kept them silent company for Black-Mask walked his horse behind them, the pounding of countless hoofs blanketing the sound of his movements; the inky curtain of darkness cloaking him.

Where the ravine widened, emptying into a meadow-like glade, the rustlers circled out, milling the cattle. Then the rustlers hunched in their saddles, waiting. Pulling his mount from the trail, Wade dismounted, tried to pierce the gloom with his eyes. Thick clusters of bushes dotted the open space. Could a man get into the midst of the rustlers undetected? Dropping to his hands and knees, Black-Mask circled cautiously. Twice he flattened himself to avoid discovery but he attained his goal, a thicket screening him from wary eyes but allowing him to listen. Snatches of words drifted to him.

Wade was scarcely settled when every rustler stiffened in tense alertness. The drum of pounding hoofs came faintly from the trail behind. Fingers curved around the butts of forty-fives until, in the impenetrable darkness, the newcomer's voice cut the ominous silence.

"I'm Dorgan," the rider announced. "Where's Klein?"

A match flared. Hands cupped it to light a smoke and the weasel face of Klein leered in the glow. "Right here, Dan," he squeaked. "Take a look at what we found wandering around the range lost-like." Wade, his eyes gradually becoming accustomed to the darkness, saw Klein sweep his arm to indicate the herd.

Dorgan grunted. "Had a helluva time shaking loose from that posse of mine after I got 'em down south. I shore burned leather catching up with you jaspers."

"The buyer ain't showed hisself yet," Klein observed.

"LaCasse? He'll be along," Dorgan said. "How's Mev Wynne been behavin'?"

"Stubborn as the devil," Klein reported. "He'll never sign away that spread if we keep him a million years."

Dorgan chuckled. "He won't have to. His gal talked old Lennox into buying up the mortgage. The law-fixer has got the thing in his office now and the Big Boss knows it. I'm getting it tomorrow night. That chore'll be easy compared to forcing an old mule like Wynne and the mortgage is as good as the ranch."

"Why didn't Steve show up tonight?"

Dorgan never hesitated. "Steve's dead," he announced bluntly. "If you'd stayed around town yesterday morning you'd know why. I done it. He threw down on an unarmed gent."

"You shot Steve! One of our best men!"

"He asked for it," Dorgan retorted. "He picked hisself a fight, then wouldn't

give the other gent an even chance. Which same proves Steve wasn't worth tying to."

"I was in the restaurant when Steve barged in and lit on young Mavity," Klein observed. "I'd 'a' stayed for the fireworks only my orders was to get out to where we're holdin' Wynne. But puttin' the pieces together, I reckon it was young Mavity Steve tried to sling lead at. Yuh set quite a store in that young whelp, Dan?"

DORGAN'S laughter boomed. "Why not?" he challenged. "We owe this haul to Mavity. His paper talked folks into thinkin' I'm a regular woolly little lamb. That's why they let me fool 'em tonight and they'll let me fool 'em again."

"Maybe. Just the same, I ain't forgettin' that one of our boys happened to overhear Mavity dickerin' with Shaw for the name of the Big Boss. By yore own say-so, that's the reason we had orders to dangle the little varmint."

"Shore, that's right," Dorgan admitted. "But Mavity was just looking for a yarn for his paper, which was natural, him being a newsman. He's too smart to get hisself really lined up against us. Look at the way his paper has hushed up lately. The Boss says Mavity's a fire-eater but plumb harmless."

Wade's jaw clamped grimly. Now he knew why Trigger Dan had interceded when Steve Metcalfe had tried to murder him. Now he understood why he'd walked in safety as Wade Mavity. He wondered if another mention of Mev Wynne would be made and strained his ears, hoping for a clue as to the rancher's whereabouts. But a diversion brought an end to this possibility. A dozen mounted men poured out of a gully to the north. Again the rustlers dropped hands to holsters. And again they relaxed as they recognized the newcomers.

"Dorgan?" a voice hissed. "It ees Jean LaCasse."

"It's about time," Dorgan growled.

This was the cattle buyer and he paused to light a cigarette, giving Wade a glimpse of the lean sparseness of him. Jean LaCasse was swarthy of face and high cheek bones and jet black hair betrayed his Indian blood.

"Let's see the dinero," Dorgan said at once.

Before the match winked out, Wade saw the Frenchman's eloquent shrug. "One leetle minute, my frien'," he murmured.

LaCasse's riders spread out, fanwise, to surround the herd. Shortly, one of them rode up, whispered a report in the buyer's ear. Evidently satisfied that the size of the herd had not been exaggerated, the Frenchman produced a roll of bills.

"Eef you will be so kind as to write, what you call her, ze bill of sale," he suggested.

"Bill of sale!" Dorgan roared. "Since when have we been writing bills of sale on these deals?"

Again the eloquent shrug. "Ze famous Trigger Dan, she is my frien'," LaCasse explained patiently. "But ze man who buy zis cows from me he inseest on ze papers. *Non?*" He moved to pocket the bills.

"All right," Dorgan grumbled. He fumbled in his pocket, found an old envelope. LaCasse produced a pencil stub. Resting the paper on his saddle horn, Dorgan scribbled off a brief note.

"Ze times change," LaCasse meditated mournfully. "Jere are so many dishonest people zeze days zat nobody trust nobody."

"Here's your bill," Dorgan snapped. "Fork over the dinero. I've got to get back south before light."

The transaction completed, Dorgan stuffed bills into his pocket, put spurs

to his horse and headed back into the ravines. Soon Klein and the others followed suit but at a more leisurely pace.

Wade still lay in the bushes, his mind busy. Acting on a hunch born with Phineas Lennox's words, Wade had ridden north this night, seen the gigantic raid. He had followed then, aware of the tremendous odds against him, hoping vainly that circumstances would shape themselves to allow him to make a play, recover the herd. Now the herd had changed hands and LaCasse's men were heading the cattle north again. But a plan had shaped itself in Wade's mind.

The last man and animal had vanished from the little meadow. Mounting, Wade followed. And now he was goaded by an overwhelming desire. He was going to get LaCasse alone, get that crude document bearing Trigger Dan's signature. For if Wade Mavity had been instrumental in causing the people of the Flats to trust Trigger Dan, then Black-Mask, with proof of Dorgan's perfidy in his possession, might alter that opinion.

MILE after mile slid behind until the hills began to thin out as they approached open country on the far side of the Sawtooths. And then, when Black-Mask began to despair of success, his opportunity came.

Cattle and men were moving slowly, listlessly. LaCasse dropped to the rear, walking his horse. Little by little the distance between the Frenchman and his riders lengthened. Then cattle and trail-herders disappeared beyond the bend of a ravine. LaCasse loitered alone just ahead.

Wade urged his mount, a well-timed movement. LaCasse was only aware that he was not alone when a gun-barrel prodded the small of his back.

"Elevate!" Wade ordered.

Surprise widened the Frenchman's small black eyes. With a jerk his hands shot upward. "M'sieu Black-Mask!" he exclaimed.

"Quiet," Wade cautioned. "Give me that bill of sale."

Something in his icy tone must have convinced LaCasse that Black-Mask wasn't here to bandy words, a favorite pastime of the cattle buyer. The Frenchman silently reached into a pocket, extended the paper. Wade snatched it, bent for a close examination. And in that brief moment of relaxed vigilance, LaCasse's long arms swung down, hammering Black-Mask's gun arm to one side.

LaCasse's arms instantly wrapped about Black-Mask, preventing Wade from using his gun. Wade managed to stuff the envelope into his pocket before he, in turn, clinched with LaCasse. Locked together, they swayed from side to side in their struggle while LaCasse raised his voice in a shriek for help.

Jean LaCasse was neither weakling nor coward. Wade realized that as drumming hoofs told him the Frenchman's riders were coming. Something had to be done—and quickly, so Wade kicking free of his stirrups, threw his entire weight against his adversary. Still locked together, the two catapulted over LaCasse's horse and plunged to the ground. LaCasse was on the bottom when they landed, the impact loosening his grip.

Those horsemen were too close for comfort. Leaping away, Wade vaulted to the saddle, wheeled his mount to the south. Behind him he heard the frenzied cries of the Frenchman, directing his men in a jumble of English, French and the Blackfeet tongue. Gunflashes stabbed the night and the hum of lead was waspish by Wade's ear.

Twisting in the saddle, he strained his eyes. One rider seemed to be in advance of the others. Wade fired at the shadow-shape, heard a yell of pain

cut above the drumming of hoofs. Wade smiled grimly. That was shooting worthy of the original Black-Mask.

The trail where chance guided him was one a sane rider would have avoided even in daylight. Now, with neither moon nor stars to light the way, he gave the mare her head and pounded through the hills at breakneck speed. Twisting, turning ravines minimized the danger of flying bullets but they increased the hazards of haste. Wade hoped fervently that LaCasse's riders would soon give up such dangerous pursuit.

And long before he'd reached the northern edge of the Frying Flats, he knew they'd turned back. Yet Wade didn't pause with this margin of safety. Hours of work lay ahead before morning if he was to accomplish the plan he'd shaped. Once in open country, he really began to race the mare, thundering across the prairie at a killing pace.

Darkness shrouded horse and rider, black inky darkness that foretold the coming of dawn, soon to peep over the eastern tips of the Sawtooths. Wade was riding against time now and the black mare responded gallantly. No hint of sunrise marred the night when they pounded into the streets of Morling.

Black-Mask galloped straight to the *Clarion* office. The street was deserted and the town cloaked in sleep. Most of the men, Wade guessed, were still far to the south on their futile vigil, led by Dorgan who had probably rejoined them to play his farce to the finish.

Dismounting before his office, Wade sent the black mare into the shadows with a slap. He paused then to gaze up and down the street. No loiterer watched his movements.

There was a smile of victory on Wade's lips as he paused before the door of the newspaper building. He had the paper that would damn Dorgan beyond a shadow of doubt. Now his task was to use that paper to the best advantage. He had a key to the office but it didn't suit his plan to use it. Instead, he stepped back a few paces, then lunged forward, hurling his shoulder against the door. Again and again he rammed the portal until the lock snapped and he lurched inside. . . .

CHAPTER XX

DEFEAT

WADE had scarcely shaken the sleep from his eyes when Dorgan called at the *Clarion* office next morning. And when Trigger Dan strode inside his features were scowl-blackened, his dark eyes snapping dangerously. In one hand he clutched the remnant of a large bill poster.

"Did you print this?" he demanded wrathfully and thrust the tattered paper at Wade.

Wade gazed stupidly at his own handiwork. Across the poster's top bold-faced type shrieked out the question: WHERE WAS DORGAN LAST NIGHT? Below in smaller type none the less noticeable, ran a word for word replica of the brief bill of sale Dorgan had given LaCasse. Large type footed the affair with an urgent question—MEN OF MORLING—WILL YOU OPEN YOUR EYES TO THE TRUTH?

Wade tried to hide the triumph in his eyes as he glanced at the poster. In the early hours of morning he'd toiled to produce a hundred like it. Just before Dorgan and his weary posse

returned to town, Wade had posted the bills on every fence, sign-board and building in town. He'd left the original bill of sale tacked on a bulletin-board outside the postoffice.

"Where did you find this?" Wade asked in feigned surprise.

Dorgan snarled. "Don't hedge, Mavity. You know damn well the town's lousy with 'em. And there ain't another print shop in miles. This is your work!"

"Sure it is! I printed 'em but I didn't post 'em."

"Who'd you print 'em for?" Dorgan thundered.

"Black-Mask," Wade said evenly.

If it staggered Dorgan, he recovered to spit out a curse. "I hope you got well paid, Mavity, since that job's liable to cost you a bellyfull of lead!"

Wade balled the rest of the poster in his hand, tossed it aside. "I printed them because Black-Mask jammed a gun in my back and told me to print 'em." He pointed eloquently to the smashed door. "Black-Mask broke in here early this morning. He pulled me out of bed and handed out his own orders. I'm asking you, man, what would you have done?"

Dorgan spun, eyed the door. Some of his belligerence had vanished. "This thing looks mighty bad for me," he grunted. "I went south with a posse last night. It was blacker than the ace of spades and I got lost from the rest when we spread out. Black-Mask must have heard about it and framed me."

"If I can put a piece in my paper and explain the truth—" Wade began.

A shrill yell interrupted him. It came from down the street. "There's Dorgan's cayuse!" someone shouted. "He's in the news-office . . ." The throaty rumble of many men drowned the rest of it.

Cursing, Dorgan hurled himself through the doorway. Wade was at his heels. And with Trigger Dan vaulting to the back of his horse, Wade saw the cause of his consternation. A mob, twenty men or so, was tramping down the street. They were after Dorgan. There was no doubting it for a hoarse shout broke from their throats as they spied the deputy. Guns were leaping to hands and Wade dived for shelter as bullets began to zing.

Dorgan, astride his horse, dipped his hands in a motion almost too quick for the eye to follow and his twin guns spouted flame. The crowd, fully a hundred yards away, dispersed, seeking cover. With a parting shot, Dorgan wheeled his horse. Spurring the animal into action, he swept down the street and out of town.

Wade poked his head from the doorway. A dozen men were running for horses. A dozen grim riders charged past the newspaper office in hot pursuit of Dorgan. And Wade smiled contentedly, knowing that the men of Morling had at last woke up. Trigger Dan Dorgan was definitely outlawed.

Wade had scored a sizeable victory. Getting the bill of sale had been a stroke of luck for, although he could have easily forged a like instrument, seeing the crude document had served to suggest the scheme to him. And those glaring posters had been like a red flag to a bull to the posse returning tired and discouraged after their fruitless night only to learn that the rustlers had raided to the north.

NOW Dorgan had been chased from town. Satisfied, Wade returned to bed. He had to snatch some sleep for he needed the rest. It had been a hard night and there was a harder one ahead. Dorgan had told Klein that he intended to strike at Lennox to get the Crippled X mortgage.

Wade awoke at sunset. And when dusk fell to shroud his movements, he

donned the regalia of Black-Mask and, waiting his opportunity, slipped across the street to the building that housed Lennox's office. Gliding through the doorway, he climbed the stairs of the deserted building and reached the lawyer's office. He'd brought pass keys and, after trying several unsuccessfully, he at last heard the lock grate and swung the door open.

The fog-like glow of the moon drifting through the window silvered the top of the desk but made the low railing and chairs seem bulky, menacing shadows. A mouse rattled papers in the wastebasket and in the stillness of the room the sound was like distant gunfire. Wade watched the little rodent scurry across the floor. Loosening his holstered guns, he selected a chair and prepared for a night-long vigil.

Faint sounds drifted from outside. Occasionally boots trod along the boardwalk to thud away into silence. Two riders, singing with no concern for harmony, rode up the street, passed, and their voices dimmed.

Wade, his nerves keyed up by the events of the past few days, stirred restlessly. His eyes growing accustomed to the darkness, his gaze searched the room to linger on the desk-top. A new thought occurred to him. Had Lennox left the mortgage in one of the drawers? It would be easy to take the paper and hide it in the *Clarion* office. Then Dorgan could strike—and strike in vain.

Stepping to the desk, Wade rifled the drawers. Stationery, letters, pens, pencils, nondescript articles were piled into them with no attempt at order. Grunting in disgust, Wade reached the last drawer which held a little tin box that brought a hiss of elation from him. He pried open the lid, scooped out a dozen legal-looking forms. Replacing the box, he was about to examine the papers when the stairs creaked.

Shoving the papers into his pocket, Black-Mask froze. Again that faint sound of a cautious footstep. Walking on his toes, Wade stole into the little ante-room that adjoined the office. Filtering moonlight revealed a squat floor safe, a littered table and a tall, old-fashioned filing cabinet. Black-Mask pressed himself into the shadow at the side of the cabinet.

Something grated at the lock of the outer door. Metal scraped against metal. The door slowly swung open and feet moved across the floor. A black blotch filled the doorway that led to the ante-room and Trigger Dan Dorgan stepped inside.

He'd come alone. And by that very token a sudden admiration for the man's courage surged through Wade. Driven from Morling that very morning, Dorgan had dared to return to do the job he might have assigned to any of his men.

Wiser in such ways than Wade, Dorgan paid no attention to Lennox's desk but proceeded at once to the little safe. Squatting before it, his broad back to Wade, he commenced working.

With one stride Black-Mask could jam his gun into the man's back, but Wade hesitated. Making Dorgan his prisoner would gain him nothing. He'd wait until Dorgan opened the safe. If it contained the mortgage, Black-Mask could easily take the paper for he held the winnings cards.

And Wade's interest centered in getting that mortgage. He'd already outlawed Dorgan, exposed the man. Yet he owed his life to Trigger Dan. Would it do to take the man prisoner? Morling men would be apt to drag the rustler to the nearest tree for a necktie party if they got their hands on him.

Dorgan went about his work methodically. As he toiled Wade could plainly hear the click of the tumblers. Had Dorgan learned this art in prison? Or

in the three years of wandering following his release, those years when he'd searched for Black-Mask? In any case he'd learned the business well for the safe door soon swung open.

PLUNGING his hands inside, Dorgan brought out a sheaf of papers. Bringing them close to his eyes, he thumbed through the bunch. One by one they were discarded to litter the floor until a grunt of satisfaction indicated that Dorgan had found what he sought.

Now was the time to strike and Wade slid forward, gun in hand. With success within his grasp, disaster suddenly shadowed his move. A briefcase lay on the floor, unnoticed in the darkness. His foot caught against it, sent him stumbling. Instantly Dorgan spun to face him and Black-Mask, lunging forward, was upon the outlaw.

Wade's gun flamed in the shadows, the roar sounding like exploding dynamite in the small space. The lead zipped past Dorgan, struck the top of the safe and ricochetted through the window, showering the floor with tinkling glass. Then neither man could use a gun for both were locked in deadly embrace. Wade managed to get a leg behind Dorgan. He thrust backward and the two tumbled to the floor, fists lashing. Over and over they rolled, neither gaining an advantage.

Dorgan reached for a gun, dragged it out. Wade, loosening his grip, locked fingers around the gunman's wrist and twisted. The forty-five clattered to the floor. Wade snatched it, hurled the weapon toward the window. With a surge of strength, Dorgan threw his adversary aside, lurched to his feet and dived for the doorway to the outer office.

Black-Mask was instantly after him. Halfway across the larger room he dived in a flying tackle, gripped Dorgan about the knees to bring him down with a crash that splintered the low railing dividing the room. The rustler tugged at his second gun but the weapon seemed to have stuck in its holster.

Wade's shot had acted as a tocsin. Feet were pounding through the night toward the building. Hoarse voices shouted questions.

Dorgan wrenched free, struggled to his feet. So did Wade. Toe to toe the two slugged ruthlessly. Trigger Dan proved to be a better man at this game than Steve Metcalfe had but this was Wade's kind of fighting and he lashed out eagerly. But luck failed him. The mask with the slitted eyeholes had become partially displaced in the struggle. A blow that grazed his cheek twisted the cloth so that for a moment he was completely blinded. He raised his hands to right the mask and a smashing body blow dropped him to the floor.

Feet were pounding just outside. Wade pulled himself to his feet, twisted his mask to see. But if Dorgan had recognized his opponent as his ancient enemy, Dorgan had also recognized that this was not the golden opportunity he had longed for. Dorgan was leaping through the doorway. After him went Wade.

Down the stairs the two men clattered. But outside both dived for cover for men were converging from everywhere, spewing from the shadows. Wade tried to keep his eyes on Dorgan. He saw the big man scuttle into an alleyway and then the rising thunder of hoofbeats told him Trigger Dan was already into the saddle and galloping away.

Panting, Wade cursed the fickleness of fate. The taste of defeat was in his mouth for the game this night had gone to the lawless. Trigger Dan had escaped. And Trigger Dan had the Crippled X mortgage.

CHAPTER XXI

Bounty on Black-Mask

NOW it was afternoon and the trail led to the cabin hideout of the Boss' Bunch, nestled in an unseen pocket in the hills.

Black-Mask had been in the saddle since the night before, riding in a futile attempt to cut sign on Trigger Dan Dorgan. But after Trigger Dan's successful coup at Lennox's office, the earth had opened to swallow the man. Now, by a process of elimination, Wade was heading for the hideout. Trigger Dan would be hiding the stolen mortgage somewhere. Trigger Dan wouldn't want to carry so important a paper with him, not with every rancher on the lookout for him. Perhaps Dorgan would leave the document at the cabin.

There was a second outlaw hideout somewhere in this vast maze of mountains. The fact that Mev Wynne wasn't held at the cabin was proof of it. Wade could only gamble that Dorgan was at the original hideout, even though the rustlers had probably abandoned the place since the Big Boss had found their foe, Black-Mask, there the night of Shaw's murder.

The place looked deserted when, leaving his horse concealed in a thicket, Wade approached the place cautiously. But Wade had grown entirely too wary to take chances on the strength of appearance. Creeping to the little window, he removed his sombrero and raised his eyes to the level of the sill. It was well he had chosen to be cautious. A man stood inside the cabin and Wade sucked in his breath in surprise as he recognized him.

Yet with the shock of discovery still upon him, Wade didn't hesitate. He hadn't expected to find this particular person here, yet the man's presence dovetailed with a theory Wade had once formed. With a feeling that luck was once again playing on his side, he palmed a gun, tiptoed to the door. One kick opened it, one leap brought him inside.

"Raise your hands!" he ordered.

Greg Decker, still garbed in boots and breeches, obeyed, his eyes widening with astonishment. He recovered himself quickly enough, smiled sardonically. "Black-Mask, eh?" he observed. "You pick the damnedest times to show up."

Wade grinned, "Maybe so. But finding you in this rattlesnakes' den sorta proves the idea I had the last time we met. I've got a hunch that we're face to face for a showdown, Mr. Big Boss!"

Decker, completely unruffled, laughed. "You sure stick with a notion," he said. "But you're dead wrong. I'm here for exactly the same reason you are, friend. I'm looking for the Crippled X mortgage!"

It staggered Wade but his gun never wavered. "How do you know what I'm after?" he asked. "How'd you know the mortgage might be here?"

Decker's eyebrows arched. "I had an elementary education," he retorted. "It so happens that somebody spotted Dorgan last night when he was making his exodus out of Morling. Folks naturally figured he had something to do with the lifting of papers which Mr. Lennox found missing this morning. I've known of this place for several weeks. I've made it a point to keep an eye on the Boss' Bunch. Putting two and two together, I reasoned that Trigger Dan might bring his piece of paper here."

"So you come running to look for it," Wade observed. "The company you work for is mighty lucky to have a

man who stops at nothing."

"You're pointing a forty-five at the entire company," Decker said. "I'm playing a lone hand. So are you. But you're the fifth ace in the deck, Black-Mask. How about you and me teaming up? Lay your cards on the table and I'll show you my hand. What are *you* after?"

"The Big Boss," Wade snapped. "You talk smooth but I still think you're my man."

DECKER shrugged and Wade had to grudgingly admire his phenomenal coolness. This Decker was a riddle, a piece to the puzzle that had never seemed to fit, but the man had iron courage and Wade recognized it. Still—

"Two riders are coming to the cabin right now," Decker said conversationally. "If I was the Big Boss I'd let them walk in and put about a pound of lead into you. To prove myself, I'm warning you. *Take a look behind!*"

It was an ancient ruse. Ordinarily Wade would have laughted at it but something in Decker's tone warned him that this wasn't the time for laughing. Whirling, Wade faced the door. Two mounted men were loping out of a ravine mouth.

"Get behind the door!" Decker hissed and almost shoved Black-Mask to cover. The Easterner squeezed close beside him. Outside, saddle leather creaked and the two arrivals stepped into the cabin. One of them swung the door shut. Wade raised the gun in his hand, saw surprise and terror mingle in the pair of faces. "Elevate!" he snapped.

Four hands jerked ceilingward. Wade recognized both men. They were two of the group who had come to this cabin with Metcalfe the night Black-Mask had had to fight his way through them. While he covered them now, Decker stepped forward, relieved the pair of their guns, tossing the weapons into a corner. He smiled at Wade.

"Still think I'm the Big Boss?" he asked.

"I made a mistake," Wade acknowledged. "Right now I want information from these jaspers and I'm gonna get it." He stepped toward the prisoners. "Where are you polecats keeping Mev Wynne?" he demanded.

Eyeing each other hesitantly, the two shrank from him. "We ain't tellin'," one of them blustered but his face was the color of wet putty.

"You'll talk or eat lead!"

"We ain't tellin'," the man repeated stubbornly.

Here was bravado and yet it wasn't convincing for it wasn't in keeping with the fear that twisted the prisoners' faces. Then Wade understood! These two were deliberately stalling. They were prolonging the inquisition by stubborn reiteration only because they knew help was close at hand. And even as the truth struck him, drumming hoof-beats reached his ears and a triumphant gleam flared in the rustlers' eyes.

"Men are coming!" Wade shouted. "Come on, Decker; we're riding!"

Still covering the two, Wade backed from the cabin, Decker at his side. The tattoo of hoofs grew louder—closer. Darting to a thicket, Decker returned astride his chestnut sorrel. Wade dashed to his own mount, flung himself into the saddle. He wasn't a second too soon for just as he spurred toward the mouth of a ravine, Decker at his heels, a half-dozen riders vomitted from an adjacent gully.

Shrill yells burst from the two rustlers at the cabin. It was warning enough to send the newcomers reaching for guns. Lead, sleeting around Wade

and Decker, ricochetted from boulders lining the trail. From the corner of his eye Black-Mask saw Decker stiffen as they spurred around a bend.

"Hit?" Wade shouted.

"They're missing by miles," Decker grinned.

But this was just a beginning. Here was a wide coulee that broadened out as they thundered along, becoming a canyon with steep, unscalable walls. Straight as an arrow the trail unrolled ahead and before the pursued reached the protection of another turn, the pursuers loped into sight behind. Wade bobbed his head to avoid the low-hanging branch of a trailside tree. The motion saved his life as a bullet clipped a leaf from the branch. Lead tugged at his sleeve, spattered the dust between the two horses. A bend took them out of range again.

The canyon emptied almost upon the edge of the Frying Flats. Leading the way to level ground, Wade headed south, skirting the hills. Now they were openly exposed to rustler fire but Wade knew the black mare could show her heels to all of them in an even race and Decker's sorrel looked speedy too. Elation flooded him for the passing minutes lengthened the distance between them and their pursuers.

BUT that elation was almost immediately replaced by alarm. Wade hadn't dared give the mare her head. He'd wanted to stay with Decker for he was grateful for the way the man had sided him back at the cabin. But Decker was clutching the saddle horn, his body bouncing from side to side as though he were a dummy lashed in a saddle. They were losing ground and a bullet hummed by, waspish, dangerously near. Wade risked a hasty glance behind. The rustlers were close —too close for comfort.

A hill loomed to their left. Another lay further south. Between the two was a draw and Wade, shouting hoarse orders to Decker, swung into it. They had to turn at an abrupt right angle but the movement hid them from the rustlers for a breathing space. Stretching out an arm, Wade grasped the bridle of Decker's mount.

"Into those trees," Black-Mask shouted, gesturing toward a clump of poplars clustered on the bank of a little stream cutting between the hills. "It's our only chance."

Decker, his face pasty, nodded. Pulling their horses to the ground, they screened themselves behind the leafy barriers none too soon. Horsemen rounded the bend, shot past them, their faces bent low over their mounts' necks.

Wade instantly kicked the mare into action. "Come on," he shouted without glancing at Decker. "They'll discover our ruse quick enough. We've got to find another hiding place."

Thundering out of the draw, they rode to the north again. Wade was confident that the pursuers would lope on south once they learned they were on the wrong trail. Heading right into the danger zone was a ruse that might work. A few miles to the north they found another draw. Turning into it, Wade pulled his mount to a stop, whistled his relief. "Whew!" he exclaimed. "What a chase!"

Decker said nothing and his silence drew Wade's eyes. Decker's face was bloodless, his mouth clamped shut. He teetered perilously in his saddle and even as Wade extended a hand to steady him, the man tottered, slid from his saddle, thudded to the ground.

Wade was beside him instantly, cradling Decker's head in his lap. "They did hit you!" Wade accused "Why didn't you speak up, man? I thought you were just a damn poor horseman."

Decker smiled but his eyes were

glazed with pain. "Not that poor," he said. "They got me when we left the cabin."

Wade ripped open the man's white silk shirt. A slug had passed just above Decker's heart. Little blood showed but Wade guessed that the man was bleeding internally. His knowledge of wounds was scanty but it was sufficient in this case. Greg Decker, Wade knew, was seriously hurt, probably dying.

"We'll have to get you to a sawbones," Wade announced.

"I'd never make it," Decker said. "You know it, too. Stay with me awhile. I want to talk. I want to tell you things while there's still time. You see, Black-Mask, I've sorta cottoned to you. I saw the way you held back that black lightning-streak of yours when you might have left me behind."

Wade nodded. The cold hand of death was near, very near. "Speak your piece," he invited softly.

"I guess I proved I'm not the Big Boss," Decker began. "The Boss and me are after the same thing—control of the Frying Flats and especially control of the Cripple X. There is no syndicate buying for dude ranches. That was my smokescreen to be in the market for land."

Wade nodded again. He was surprised to find himself so cool when inwardly he trembled with eagerness. "What makes the Frying Flats so valuable?" he asked.

Decker choked and gasped. Blood flecked his lips. "Oil," he managed to murmur.

"Oil!"

"Oil is my business," Decker continued with an effort. "I grew up in the Texas fields. Didn't Shaw tell you—the night you snatched him for the Boss' Bunch?"

"He never had time," Wade said. He was beginning to understand many things.

"Shaw and I were partners in Texas," Decker continued and now talking didn't seem such an effort. "He'd been in Montana before and he left for here, again, after he'd gotten an unsigned letter from Morling, offering him big money to look over the section with an eye to oil possibilities. The whole deal sounded loco. He was to meet the letter-writer at that cabin we just left. I laughed at the whole notion but he never came back to Texas so I figured maybe he'd stumbled on something pretty good up here after all. I trailed along and when I saw this country I knew the answer. If I ever set eyes on oil land I saw it on the Crippled X. And quite a few of the other ranches are worth sinking a well into."

CLOSING his eyes, Decker sank back exhausted. Wade marveled at his grit. But at the same time his mind was crowded with the news he'd received. Oil! Now he knew why the Big Boss had instigated a reign of terror to break the ranchers. And why not? Several sections of Montana had produced gushers so perhaps the Flats also hid that black treasure. Small wonder that the Big boss hadn't let Shaw leave the Flats with this valuable secret.

Decker, opening his eyes, spoke again. "Lawson Kemp knew it too. Or at least he suspected. A newspaper man has his eye open for every possibility. That's why Lawson Kemp died. I know. I saw him die."

"You did?" Wade jerked, and his mind went back to that night when murder had stalked the night-shrouded streets of Morling. "Who killed him?"

"Steve Metcalfe. On orders from the Big Boss. You see, I stopped in at the *Clarion* office that night to see Kemp about advertising for ranches in his paper. I came in the back way and I came in quietly. Metcalfe and Kemp

were talking in the dark. Metcalfe was bullying the editor, trying to force Kemp to admit something. Finally Kemp spoke up. 'Sure I know there's oil hereabouts,' he said. 'But I didn't tell *him*. You don't think I'd give away that kind of information do you? If I can rake up some money to invest, I'll make myself a killing.'

" 'He was in here,' Metcalf insisted. 'I didn't see him but others did. What was you two palavering about?'

" 'Not about oil,' Kemp said. 'Honest to Pete, I've never told a soul about that.'

" 'And you never will!' Metcalfe said and just the way he said it made my hair curl. Then there was a muffled sound, like a gun swathed in cloth being shot. Metcalfe dived out through the door and I followed him."

Wade broke from his mesmerization. "Why?" he asked.

"Because I figured he was going to look up the man Kemp had talked to, the man who hadn't been named. I was curious about that and there was nothing I could do for Kemp. I trailed Metcalfe to the alley behind the Fairview House. Someone was silhouetted against a window blind. I saw Metcalfe draw a bead on him, fire. I jumped Metcalfe but I was a second too late to spoil his aim. He clouted me with the gun, beat it. I was pretty groggy and I'd just about recovered myself when young Wade Mavity come charging into the alley and grabbed me."

"I heard something about that," Wade said. "You played 'possum on him and got away."

"I didn't want to get involved. The Big Boss knew—through Shaw—what my game was, which was to control a little of this oil country myself. The Boss didn't dare expose me for fear of tangling his own loop. But I was afraid he might have pulled wires and had me jailed, maybe hung for Kemp's murder. I figgered I'd better stay out of Morling till the thing blew over. But I did go to Vic Bohler that night, tell him part of the truth about Kemp. I didn't mention oil, but I did put the finger on Steve Metcalfe."

Wade's eyes widened. "Bohler knew all along that Metcalfe was the killer? And he never made any attempt to jail him! There's something mighty fishy about Vic Bohler's way of doing business."

But Decker's mind seemed to wander. "You could have run away from them anytime," he murmured. "You held back to stay by me and that's why I'm telling you what I know. Watch yourself, Black-Mask. When I crept up to the cabin today, a couple of rustlers were inside talking. The Big Boss has decided that the most important thing to do is to get rid of you before he goes any further. He's offered ten thousand dollar bounty to the man who tacks your hide on the wall. That's why the boys burned leather today. I hope. . . ."

His voice failed him but he rallied again. "It was a good game while it lasted," he said distinctly. "Will you let me see your face, Black-Mask?"

If Wade hesitated, it was only for a second. His secret would be safe with Greg Decker, safe and silent as the grave. Yet even as he lifted his free hand, the oil man stiffened in his arm. And Wade Mavity removed his sombrero instead of his mask for Greg Decker was dead.

CHAPTER XXII

Baited Trap

A LONE wolf had followed his last trail. Wade felt genuine sorrow at Decker's passing. He had scarcely known the man and had heartily detested him at first, but today's dangers had proved that Decker knew the meaning of both loyalty and courage. An admitted crook, still Decker had played the game according to a code of sorts.

There was nothing left to do for him now but scoop a shallow grave. Wade marked it with rocks. Another day he would return and give the man proper burial. Now there was work to do for the amazing information Decker had given him completely reshuffled the deck.

Mounted and on the plain again, Black-Mask saw no riders. He headed for the Crippled X, curious to see whether Mev Wynne had been released now that the mortgage was in outlaw hands. There would be scant reason for holding the rancher now, unless it were to prevent him from raising money to redeem the paper. And with his prime beef plucked in the last raid, that was out of the question.

Someday, soon, that mortgage would be foreclosed by a dupe of the Big Boss. That the paper had been stolen would count for little. Possession was a lot of law in this unsettled section. The Wynnes would have to surrender their ranch or fight. And there'd be no way of hiring guns with their resources dwindled.

The game was sewed-up, Wade reflected grimly, with the outlaws holding all the aces. He was still looking for a loophole when he arrived at the Crippled X. The corrals were empty and there was little sign of life about the ranch buildings so, riding boldly to the gate, Wade halloed the house.

The Chinese cook poked his wrinkled, yellow face from the doorway. For all the amazement that shown in his slanted eyes, masked riders might have called upon him a dozen times a day.

"Noblody home," he announced.

"They cut sign on Mev Wynne yet?"

"Nope."

"Where's Miss Wynne?"

"She lide down talk to Bluck Callahan. Gone fifteen minits ago."

"So long, China," Wade shouted and, wheeling his horse, headed south.

It seemed queer that the Boss' Bunch was still holding Wynne. And loping along, he found himself concerned because Judy chose to ride alone. It was natural that she should visit her nearest neighbor but he wished that she'd taken at least one of her father's riders for protection. His concern grew to become a gripping premonition of disaster and he found himself racing the mare.

A low bluff cut off the view of the Leaning Circle buildings from the north. Before Black-Mask topped the barrier, his premonition strengthened into grim certainty. Smoke rose from the buildings, black smoke, far too thick and voluminous to be cook-fire smoke. At the top of the bluff he paused in horror at the sight below him. Raking spurs goaded the mare to her top speed.

The long, low bunkhouse that had withstood the devastating charge of dynamite was a seething mass of flame. Red tongues of fire also licked along the rear wall of the little shack Buck had thrown up as a temporary ranchhouse.

A misstep of his mount might catapult him over her head, yet Wade raced down the hillside. Before the shack he

leaped from the saddle, rushed to the door and flung it open. A billowing cloud of smoke forced him back, reeling and gasping. Throwing an arm before his face, he plunged inside.

A red, livid glow behind the smoke haze evidenced that the fire had eaten through the rear wall. Groping, Wade stumbled over an inert form sprawled upon the floor. The man groaned feebly as Wade stooped, reached for a hold under the fellow's armpits. When he'd dragged the unconscious form through the doorway he saw that it was Buck.

WHERE was Judy? With his partner stretched upon the ground at a safe distance, Wade dashed back into the shack, a paralyzing fear eating at him. Frantically he felt about the small interior, now well ablazed, a mingled sense of elation and foreboding upon him as he found no one. Cracking timber warned him to retreat and he leaped out of the doorway just as the rear wall thundered in collapse.

Dragging Buck still further from the inferno, he ripped open the puncher's shirt and found two bullet wounds. Neither was serious. A blow on the head, evidenced by a swelling lump, had made Buck unconscious.

Wade tore the cowboy's shirt into strips and bandaged the wounds. With the flow of blood stanched, he was about to go to the well for water when two riders topped the bluff and charged down upon them. Black-Mask tensed, his hands gripping gun butts.

Eyes narrowed, he watched the approaching horsemen. But as they swung from their saddles he saw the Crippled X brand upon their mounts.

"What's happened?" they demanded. "Where's Miss Judy? The Chink just told us you headed this way looking for her."

"I don't know," Black-Mask replied. "But I know there's devil's work going on here. I just found the place afire, Buck laid out in the shack and Judy missing."

The two cowpokes were instantly into their saddles, hands groping for quirts. "We're trailin'," one of them shouted.

Wade leaped, grasped both bridles. "I've got a better plan," he yelled. "Listen—"

He hardly knew what sort of reaction to expect. Would their riders remember the Black-Mask who was accused of murdering Shaw, playing a lone-wolf game? Or would they remember the justice-rider who'd exposed Dorgan, the Black-Mask who'd been the friend of the Wynnes in the past?

"Speak yore piece," one of them invited.

"Ride to Morling," Wade ordered. "One of you get the sawbones and bring him back here for Callahan. The other can round up the posse that's been organized to clean up the rustlers. If the sheriff wants to ride with the fighting men, let him—but keep an eye on that galoot. Ride north with the fighting men."

In terse words he snapped out detailed directions for finding the cabin hideout of the rustlers. More than likely the outlaws had taken the girl to their other lair, the unknown spot where Mev Wynne was being held. But a raid on the original hideout might bag some of the outlaws, weaken their forces. It was showdown now.

"Trailin' Judy is a one-man job," he said. "I'm electin' myself for it. Ride!"

They rode, heading their horses toward Morling. With their mounts dissolving into hazy dust specks, Wade hurried to the well, returned with a bucket of water which he splashed over Buck. The lean puncher groaned loudly and opened his eyes to stare in bewilderment at the masked figure bending over

him. He tried to scramble to his feet, found he hadn't the strength.

"What happened here?" Wade demanded.

"Me and Miss Judy was gossipin' in front of the shack," Buck explained jerkily. "A half-dozen polecats loped down from the north. They was shootin' before I knew who they was. They plugged me twice, dragged me into the shack and started firin' the place. From their talk, I knew they figgered on takin Judy with 'em. I started to crawl for the door when one of them varmints come in an' apprehended me, so's to speak. He parted my hair with a forty-five. . . ."

Wade's teeth clicked angrily. The same group who had chased him and Decker from the hideout had done this work. Discovering the ruse to elude them, the outlaws had returned to the plain and headed south, just as Wade had guessed they would. Black-Mask had saved himself only to send his pursuers stumbling upon Judy.

"Listen, feller," Wade said. "I've sent for a sawbones to patch you up. Could you stay here alone till he comes?"

BUCK'S old familiar grin returned. "You don't have to hunker here holdin' my hand," he retorted. "Ride, yuh son-of-a-gun, and head for Best Chance."

"Best Chance?"

"Shore, yuh know the old ghost-town up in the north Sawtooths. Before that jasper rapped my skull with his cannon, I heard one of them snakes saying they should take Judy there. I gathered they was holding old Mev at the same place."

Best Chance! The ghost-town, then, was the rustlers' second lair. Wade had heard of Best Chance, phantom relic of a short-lived gold strike. He'd never visited the place but he had a good idea of its location.

"Once the doc gets you patched," he snapped, "try and run down the posse that'll be riding north. Head 'em for Best Chance, fellar."

Then Black-Mask was into the saddle. Buck waved a weak farewell as Wade skirted the smouldering ruins. Once beyond the bluff and on level ground, Black-Mask headed north at top speed.

But with the miles unreeling and the hills looming larger, Wade came to an ominous conclusion. There was just one reason why Judy had been kidnapped. There was just one reason why the outlaws were still holding Mev Wynne.

The Big Boss had placed bounty money on Black-Mask's head. The friendship between Black-Mask and the Wynnes was legendary. The outlaws had kidnapped Judy for bait to lure Black-Mask, knowing he'd take the trail of the stolen girl.

Each mile made the truth more obvious. The rustlers took no pains to hide sign. They knew who'd be trailing them and they were making Black-Mask's task the easier. And so, when the westering sun lengthened the shadow of horse and rider, Black-Mask neared Best Chance. Well aware of the danger that waited, he urged his mount onward, riding straight for the baited trap.

CHAPTER XXIII

GHOST-TOWN SHOWDOWN

AT the mouth of Best Chance gulch, Black-Mask dismounted to stalk forward on foot. Rounding a turn, he had his first glimpse of the ghost-town. There were no signs of humans but Black-Mask eyed the place

with distrust. He sensed ambush. To march up the gulch might mean exposing himself to withering gunfire.

Halfway up one hillside sat an old building, situated to overlook the entire gulch. Bending low, Wade climbed toward it. He reached the house unscathed but the feeling that watching eyes marked him was stronger than ever.

The door hung on one hinge. Kicking it open, he stepped inside. That was when a slug splintered the ancient woodwork of the casing and a gun cracked somewhere below. Wade leaped to the protection of the interior just as he heard Judy's voice calling, not far away. "Down here!" she shrilled.

Edging to the door, Wade peeped out. The angry buzz of lead from a dozen marksmen sent him scurrying again but in the second before he dodged he glimpsed Judy's face, white and strained. She was peering from the rear window of a building not half a dozen yards below him on this same side of the gulch. The girl waved frantically.

Wade judged that Judy was alone in the building for no one attempted to stop her signal. To reach her meant a mad dash down the slope.

His mind working desperately, Wade sought a plan to get to the girl. There was a way—a hazardous way—but it was the best he could think of. Stepping to the door again, he emptied a gun into the building that seemed to house most of the rustlers. Lead showered about him in reprisal. Throwing his arms above his head, Wade pitched forward on his face. A shout of exultation burst from a dozen throats as his body rolled down the slope to the door of the building below. Then leaping to his feet Wade dived through the doorway. Too late the rustlers sensed his strategy and their curses echoed while hungry lead sought the spot where Wade had been.

Judy stood just inside the door and instantly she came to him.

THE ponderous form of Mev Wynne bulked in the doorway that led to the front of the building. The cattleman stepped forward with outstretched hand.

"What are you two doing here alone?" Wade asked.

"They left us here, bound and gagged," the girl explained. "The outlaws knew you'd be hot on our trail. They hid themselves all over the town to shoot you down. I managed to get free and untied Dad. He kept watch through the front while I tried to warn you."

"They've got us sewed-up, too," Mev grumbled, shaking his iron-gray head. "Lend me a gun, amigo. My finger's been itching for a trigger."

Wade extended a weapon. "Did they hurt you?"

"They tried to starve me into signin' over the Crippled X," he growled. "I had a couple of lean days till Dorgan come along and told the lizzards he'd got holt of the mortgage. He made 'em start feedin' me."

"Is Dorgan here now?"

"He's somewheres about. When them skunks brought Judy here and started schemin' an ambush, he didn't seem to cotton to the notion but he finally agreed."

Wade hunkered near the window, Mev Wynne beside him. Now it was impossible for the outlaws to sneak upon their little fort undetected. Dorgan's men might get behind the building but they'd have to circle around, come down from the top of the hill. This would take a great deal of time with only a slight chance that the maneuver might be advantageous.

The firing became desultory. From the Wynnes, Wade learned that at

least fifteen men besieged them.

Already Wade was regretting that he hadn't personally collected the posse before riding to Best Chance. He cursed his own foolhardiness in attempting a single-handed rescue. Concern for Judy had robbed him of caution, blinded him to danger. Now instead of saving the girl he'd only succeeded in getting himself trapped as well.

In the lulls between gunshots, Wade jerked out the news he'd learned from Decker. The Wynnes greeted it jubilantly.

"Oil on the old spread!" Mev chuckled. "Never thought about that. Mortgage or no, I'll show them buzzards some gunsmoke if they try to move me off now."

Wade, jaw grim, was silent. Mev Wynne's sudden discovery of hidden wealth was liable to prove of little value since the outlaws had them bottled up. In one of the heavy moments of silence that hung between bursts of gunfire, the voice of Dan Dorgan boomed to echo from wall to wall of the gulch.

"Better surrender, Black-Mask," he advised. "We'll get you when night comes."

Here was truth. The slight advantage now held by Wade and the Wynnes would dissolve with darkness. The shroud of night would cover the outlaws, allow them to approach without danger of reprisal. They dared not approach now but when the sun set they could be almost at the door before the three would detect their presence.

One concentrated rush would spell the end. There was no way of barricading this ancient building and a dozen men would be upon them, coming from every side. Wade and Wynne might get a few of them but the end would be inevitable. Ten thousand dollars bounty was incentive enough for these underlings of the Big Boss.

There was one ray of hope—dim and distant. Buck Callahan knew their whereabouts. But Buck Callahan wouldn't be in shape to ride this day, or for many days probably. By the time one Crippled X waddy fetched the doctor and learned of the trap at Best Chance, the second puncher would have led the posse miles away to the empty cabin hideout. The cowpoke who brought the doctor might ride to head the posse toward the ghost-town, but it would be midnight or morning before help came.

DORGAN'S voice jerked Wade from his gloomy thoughts. "Ready to surrender yet?" Dorgan demanded.

Wade didn't reply at once. Instead his eyes wandered to Judy who had been persuaded to stretch herself upon the floor, out of peril's way. Wade had lived with danger since the day he'd accepted his night-riding heritage. He could take his chances tonight—but what of this girl he loved? Supposing a stray bullet intended for him found her instead.

"Dorgan!" Wade cried. "How about letting Mev and his gal go free? You don't want them—you want me. Let 'em go, Dorgan."

Wade held his breath as the echoes toyed with his proposal. Trigger Dan Dorgan was an enigma, a man who had proved himself capable of both chivalry and villainy. He was a long time making his retort.

"If it's a bargain you want, I'll make one," Dorgan called and stepped into view in the doorway of the decrepit saloon across the gulch. Smothering an oath, Mev Wynne raised his gun but Wade stayed him with a gesture.

"You savvy why I came back to the Frying Flats," Dorgan began. "I want another chance at you, Black-Mask. Give me your word you'll meet me in

Morling tomorrow, gun in hand, and I'll let all three of you go!"

"You can't do that, Dorgan!" a squeaking voice interjected hastily and Wade instantly recognized it as Klein's. "They's ten thousand dollars on yonder gent's scalp. We got him here to get it."

Dorgan spun, facing the saloon. "Shut yore face," he told Klein. "I didn't ask your opinion, you bounty-hunting rat. I've waited twenty years for my day with this man. If I kill him, then you and the rest can split the scalp-money. I want none of it. If he kills me, you can still go after him."

Klein was silent and no other dissenting voice raised itself. Dorgan still commanded the lawless legion.

But Wade was thinking fast. Once he passed his word to Dorgan, he'd have to face the man, come hell or high water. Dorgan was willing to free them on a promise. Wade would have to keep that promise. Still, if he must risk his life why shouldn't he get the highest price?

"Name the Big Boss, too, and I'll accept," Black-Mask said.

Dorgan shook his head. "I ain't double-crossin' the Big Boss," he retorted. "Maybe I haven't any more use for him than you have, but he trusted me and I ain't lettin' him down. When I come back here lookin' for you he give me a job as headman. I took it because I knew it was sure-fire to bring you into the open. I'm wanting all of Morling to see our fight but I'll shoot you down here in the gulch tonight before I'll throw the Boss in on the deal."

"They're laying for you in Morling," Wade reminded him. "They'll hang you to the closest cottonwood if you show your face."

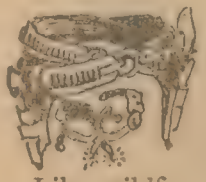
"I took that chance twenty years ago. I'll take it again."

Nothing could swerve Dorgan from his idea. And for the first time Wade truly sensed just how highly the man prized his gun-slinging reputation. Trigger Dan would never release Mev Wynne or his daughter under any other conditions but the ones he'd named. Trigger Dan held the cards to force a showdown and the life of the girl Wade loved was a white chip in a no-limit game.

Wade cleared his throat. It came to him that there was an inevitability about all this, the shaping of a destiny he could no longer dodge. "Name the time of day you want," he snapped. "I'll be there, Dorgan—gun in hand!"

CHAPTER XXIV

Dorgan's Day



BLACK-MASK was going to meet Trigger Dan Dorgan to finish their ancient feud!

Like wildfire fanned by the whirlwind, the news spread the length and breadth of the Frying Flats. Men deserted their work to straddle horses, load into buckboards for a trip to town. Not since the day of the first epic battle between the two had there been so many people in town.

Wade and Trigger Dan had agreed to meet at high noon, an hour which would give neither the disadvantage of sun in his eyes. Long before eleven the street was crowded as Morling prepared for a Roman holiday.

But Wade Mavity didn't know this. When Dorgan, true to his word, had let the three leave Best Chance unscathed, Black-Mask had ridden to the Cripple X with the father and daughter. Then he'd headed to Bart's hidden cabin to spend the night.

Dorgan's day dawned peaceful and serene.

"The condemned man ate a hearty meal," he said aloud over breakfast.

Since the day of Steve Metcalfe's death, the day Wade had listened to the Morling men, spell-bound by the speed of Dorgan's draw, Wade had lost his hope of besting the gunman. Still, it was hours until noon so he spent many cartridges in practice, finally giving it up as futile effort. His weeks on the Frying Flats, his arduous hours of practice had given him speed that would have been the envy of any waddy. But would it compare to Dorgan's lightning draw?

Feeling very much like a prisoner awaiting execution, Wade returned to the cabin, began a lengthy letter. It was intended for Buck and gave information to enable that cowpoke to complete Black-Mask's work if he chose. With luck today, Wade reflected grimly, he might do that chore himself before sunset but the odds were great.

He stuffed an envelope with papers, including the deed to his own Leaning Circle, and thrust the bulky envelope into his shirt-front. Outside, a glance at the sun brought his fingers to his lips to summon the black mare. It was close to noon. Time had loped while he'd worked on the letter.

But whistle as he might the mare didn't appear. Filled with concern, Wade strode around the cabin and began to thrash through the timber.

Half-a-hundred yards behind the cabin Wade came to an abrupt halt. A tiny stream gurgled down the mountain-side and a saddled, riderless horse drank from the stream. The animal was old and decrepit, its saddle and trappings equally ancient. Where was its rider? Drawing a gun, Wade circled warily in a swift examination that revealed exactly nothing.

Half-a-horse was better than none. Leading the awkward creature back to the cabin, Wade, approaching the place from a new angle, made another startling discovery. Boot tracks dimpled the soft loam. Someone had prowled about the cabin, probably the previous night!

Wade fell to his knees, studied the tracks. As he saw where they led, genuine consternation replaced his former vague fears. Whoever had made the tracks had lingered by the lone window of the little cabin, evidently spying upon him.

WHISTLING softly, Wade straightened, eyed the crowbait. "Whoever rode you," he observed, "must have seen plenty."

Last night he'd sat by lamp-light, wearing the regalia of Black-Mask but without the mask. He hadn't worried about discovery. This cabin's location had been known only to Bart Mavity this last twenty years.

The footprints told him little—the horse less. Someone had discovered his hiding place. But who? Some saddle tramp who'd seen the sleek black mare and decided to swap horses? The footprints led to a little outhouse where Wade had tossed his black saddle and gear. Those things were gone, too.

But this wasn't the time for solving riddles. He still had an appointment with Trigger Dan and the sun was crawling near zenith. Wade scratched his head ruefully as he surveyed the horse he'd found. Could he possibly squeeze enough speed from the cayuse to get to town by twelve?

In the battered saddle, he kicked the animal to life. Spurs forced the creature into a gallop but it took continual effort to maintain the pace.

He heaped invectives upon the horse. Actually his thoughts were upon other things. Supposing the nocturnal

prowler had been a lone rustler who'd been afraid to try and capture Black-Mask singled-handed? Supposing the man had taken his news to the outlaw legion? What would Dorgan do if he'd learned that the man who was Black-Mask was Wade Mavity and not his ancient enemy of the past? But Wade knew the answer. Trigger Dan would keep his appointment regardless. He'd have to, or be branded a coward by those who wouldn't know the truth.

Hours seemed to pass before Wade sighted the false-fronts of Morling. Yet the sun, straight overhead, told him he'd made a speedy trip. Nearer, he saw the crowd jamming the street. How had so many people learned of the fight so soon? Wade didn't know but he did know they'd come. They wanted to see a fight and after that fight was over, history would repeat itself. Dorgan had placed his head in the lion's mouth that bygone day when he'd met Black-Mask. And his doom would be sealed today whether he won or lost.

Once the gun-duel was finished, the crowd would be upon the rustler if he were still alive. Before, Dorgan's offenses had gotten him a prison sentence. This time they'd take Dorgan to the nearest gallows tree.

Wade was still unmasked and trail dust covered him from head to foot, disguising his black regalia. Wade headed first for his print shop. He wanted to find out if that nocturnal prowler had brought news of Black-Mask's true identity to Morling and he succeeded in reaching the rear door of the shop. Several riders, lean brown waddies from some outlaying ranch, passed him but they paid little attention to his garb, scarcely giving him a glance as they hurried toward the street.

Wade slithered to a stop at the rear door. Dismounting, he dived inside the building, almost colliding with Craft. The printer had just discarded his work apron for a street coat and he eyed his employer in astonishment.

"What's happened around here?" Wade demanded.

"Happened?" Craft parroted. "Plenty! Where you been?"

"Never mind. How did all these people learn about the fight?"

Craft's eyebrows jerked. "Didn't you know? The rustlers let the news out. Black-Mask sent a posse to their cabin hideout yesterday. Bohler and the boys found the place empty and waited in ambush. The outlaws returned from another hideout at Best Chance and walked right into the arms of the posse. Bohler captured every last one of 'em. They're crowding the jail right now and that's how the news spread around."

"Dorgan too?"

"Naw, he left the rustlers at Best Chance." The printer stepped to the front door, pointed down the street. "Look!"

WADE peered. The sight that met his eyes staggered him like a physical blow.

Lounging against the hitching rail before the Only Chance Saloon, apparently oblivious to the menacing crowd about him, was Trigger Dan Dorgan. His outlaw friends under lock and key, still the gunman had dared enter this town where every man's hand was against him. But it was not this evidence of Dorgan's audacity that left Wade gasping.

Hitched to the rack, close beside Dorgan's horse, was the missing black mare, stolen from Black-Mask's hideout the night before. A man had swung from the saddle, a man who rivetted Wade's attention to the exclusion of all else.

Now Wade knew why he'd been able

to enter town undetected. Now he knew why Craft had paid no attention to his, Wade's somber garments beneath the dust pall. For to all appearances the man who had just arrived to keep the rendezvous with Dorgan was Black-Mask!

This strange rider wore the same black sombrero, shirt, chaps, mask—the same garb that had clad Wade in his justice-riding role. In every detail that man out there was the duplicate of Black-Mask!

CHAPTER XXV

Gun In Hand

HERE was mystery and the spell of it held Wade trance-like. This rider from nowhere obviously intended to take his place. Wade took a half-step forward and paused. In the doomsday hush that suddenly blanketed the street, the voice of the unknown spoke through the muffling mask and Wade knew he was too late to interfere.

"Reckon we can run this show same as last time?" the unknown asked Dorgan.

The voice gave no clue to his identity. The mask disguised it just as it had disguised Wade's.

Dorgan shrugged, spat into the dust. "Fair enough," he agreed. "I'll walk to one end of the street. You head the other direction. At town's end we'll turn around and start back toward each other. Whichever one of us feels lucky can start the fireworks."

"O. K." the substitute Black-Mask said. Dorgan hitched his huge shoulders, turned his back and took a step toward the west end of the street. The masked man hesitated. "Just a minute, Dan," he said.

Dorgan whirled, a scowl darkening his face. "What it is?"

"Seems like we're always on opposite sides of the fence," the other said. "But I just wanted to tell you, Dan, that I've got nothing personal again' you and never had." The man extended his hand. "Goodbye, old-timer, just in case . . ."

Dorgan eyed his enemy in stupefied silence. Slowly a grin softened the set lines of the gunman's face. "I believe you mean it," he finally blurted. "I've got no hard feelings either." His hand shot forward. "I'd wish you good luck," Dorgan continued somewhat huskily, "if it didn't mean bad luck for me."

The grin faded. Dorgan swung, started up the street. The masked man took the opposite direction.

Craft had already darted out to the street. Wade would have followed him but, glancing down at his own clothing, he grimaced. Two Black-Masks would lead to a lot of questions. Hurrying to the back room, Wade made a lightning change to other garb. He burned with curiosity but there was no time for speculation. He didn't hanker to miss a single act of the drama about to take place.

Since the saloon centered the town, each opponent was able to reach his end of the street and turn almost simultaneous with the other. When Wade joined the throngs on the street, the two were heading back, pacing slowly, eyes alert for the move of a hand.

Slowly the distance closed between them and as the space narrowed, the street emptied miraculously. Men who had crowded the boardwalks before now scurried for the shelter of doorways. A dying man can shoot but he scarcely ever aims. In a few moments

the street was deserted save for a few men who had climbed to roof-tops for a better view. Faces peeped furtively from everywhere. Out in the dust of the street the two drew nearer, nearer . . .

Wade was in the saloon's doorway. Men pressed him on either side but he might have been alone. He was only conscious of the two gunmen striding along. Now they were almost within shooting distance. Wade's nails dug his palms but he knew no pain. Just as a man peering from the lip of a precipice is overwhelmed with a desire to leap, so Wade longed for the shooting to begin so this nerve-straining ordeal would be over.

Thirty yards separated the pair. Step by step they plodded closer. Twenty-five yards . . . twenty yards . . . fifteen yards. . . . Then Morling ceased to breathe as both streaked hands to holsters. Two shots blended, became one. Wade's gaze swivelled to his own substitute. The psuedo Black-Mask stood with legs apart, smoke curling lazily from his forty-five. Dorgan was empty-handed, staring at his right hand as though it didn't belong to him. The masked man had shot the gun away just as Dorgan squeezed the trigger. Only a split second had separated their draws.

THIS unknown could shoot! There had been another man who could shoot, another man who had bested Dorgan on this very street. It was a thought that made Wade stare at the masked man with new interest. It was a thought utterly fantastic, too incredible to entertain since a grave gave it the lie. Wade shook his head to rid himself of the notion.

The masked man shifted his gun from his right hand to his left. Blood glinted in the sunlight, spattered to the dust. Only then did Wade realize that Dorgan's shot had struck the masked-man's own gun hand.

Trigger Dan stared, shook his apathy away, reached again, clawing with his left hand for his other holster. The other's gun spoke twice. The first shot tore the holster from Dorgan's side. The second sent the rustler's hand clawing at his left shoulder. Dorgan, his face starkly white with pain, spoke. "You win, Black-Mask," he said and the words seemed to ring in the silence that ruled the street.

It was over. It took a moment for Morling to realize it but it did. And suddenly men were pouring from every building, a vengeance-bent mob. They yelled. They shouted. It was the rumble of the wolf-pack closing in for the kill.

"Hang the damn rustler!" someone shouted and it became a chorus that grew and swelled.

And Wade, feeling as though he too had been released from a trance, found himself leaping forward. And without being conscious of a decision, he knew he was going to place himself at Dorgan's side. He didn't blame these Morling men for their lynch lust. Dorgan symbolized the Big Boss to them. But Wade owed his life to Dorgan and, more, he'd come to respect this riddle of a man who played this game according to his own queer code.

Shoving and elbowing ruthlessly, Wade tried to force a way through the crowd. But, suddenly, Dorgan had another champion. The masked man was flourishing his gun. "Get back!" he shouted. "You're not lynching anybody today! I'll kill the first man who lays a hand on Dorgan!"

His voice was as menacing as the shooting iron that backed it. Sullenly, the mob receded. The masked man watched them.

"Climb onto your cayuse," he ordered Dorgan. Teeth bared in a snarl

of defiance at the massed men, Dorgan obeyed. The masked man was at his side but he didn't relax vigilance for a second. Aiding Dorgan into the saddle, he clambered aboard his own mount. "Drop your guns," he told the men who shifted about them. "Don't make any mistakes while you're doing it."

Rage and thwarted hate flamed in a hundred eyes but the crowd silently obeyed. Belts and holsters were thudding into the dust as the imitation Black-Mask wheeled his mount, Dorgan following suit. Both were kicking their horses into action when a gun cracked, apparently from a rooftop. Dorgan stiffened in the saddle while his partner in peril, twisting, sent lead streaking upward. But no marksman was visible.

The mob might have taken an incentive from that lone gun-slinger. Before they could, the masked man led the way in a wild charge from town; Dorgan behind him. That hidden gunman hadn't hurt Dorgan badly. There was proof for Dorgan rode like a centaur.

Released from the menace of the deadly gun, the men of Morling dived for their discarded weapons, raced for mounts. Wade, watching them, grinned. It would be a hard-riding posse that would overtake Dorgan or the fleet mare of his champion. And something told Wade that these men hadn't any stomach for closing with the two who had just proved their gun prowess.

With the posse clattering from town, Morling began a half-hearted attempt to return to normalcy. Wade found himself in a knot of men who babbled excitedly of the things that had transpired. He quickly forced his way from them, strode aimlessly away until his footsteps, leading him to the sheriff's office, reminded him of other things that had happened this past twenty-four hours. Stepping inside, he found the one man in Morling who apparently hadn't concerned himself with the epic fight. Vic Bohler sat placidly behind his desk, chubby hands idly shuffling a worn pack of cards.

"Hello, Mavity," the sheriff greeted him lazily. "Quite a lot of fuss around these parts."

"Plenty," Wade agreed. "They tell me you've loaded your jail-house right to the door."

"Yep. Fixed the door, too," Bohler admitted. "You recollect it was plumb busted the night lynchers took Shaw. Looks like maybe so we're set for another twenty years o' peace on the Frying Flats."

"You did a real job, Sheriff," Wade said. "I want to apologize for misjudging you. I had you all wrong. I even figured you were in with the rustlers when you made Trigger Dan a deputy."

BOHLER carefully laid out cards for a game of solitaire. "Did look kinda queer," he confessed. "Course when you stop to think of it careful-like, it was one way of keeping Dan out of mischief just in case he *was* rustling like Black-Mask said. Of course Shaw got hisself killed and so did Steve Metcalfe while Dan was deputy but I don't think the voters 'll hold that ag'in me."

"Probably not. You know your business, Sheriff."

"Think so?" Bohler queried. "Course now, I could have chased all over the Flats weeks ago, tryin' to run down the Big Boss and his crowd, but supposin' I had? They'd have got right peeved and a gent my size makes a hell-uva big target. Likewise, I mighta jailed Metcalfe for killin' Lawson Kemp, which same I happen to know he did. That would 'a' been like declarin' a one-man war on the Big Boss. I sorta figgered the healthy thing to do

was to wait until the ranchers got riled enough to back any play I made. And I gotta thank Black-Mask for finally gettin' them boys to see the light."

Wade extended his hand and the sheriff neglected his cards to take it. "I could have taken lessons from you," Wade said and he meant it for now he saw the extent of the Sheriff's sagacity.

"Shucks, now, you didn't do so bad yourself," Bohler observed. "If I fooled you, then you shore fooled me. Took quite a spell 'fore I figgered out why you never happened to be around when Black-Mask was ridin'."

Wade stared incredulously. "You're mistaken, Bohler," he finally said. "Black-Mask just rode out of town with Dan Dorgan."

"Shore he did," the sheriff agreed. One eye closed in a ponderous wink. "You don't want me to forget that—and I won't. And don't be worryin' yourself that anybody else got curious about you, 'cause they didn't. I'd never 'a' paid any attention to you, myself, only I happened to notice something a few weeks back that started me thinkin' about the Mavity family. You see, son, I *know* who played Black-Mask for you today."

"You know!" Wade echoed. He leaned forward eagerly. "Tell me, who was that man? The only guess I could make would be loco."

Bohler eyed him speculatively. "On the level, now," he asked, "don't you know?"

"I don't."

Bohler flipped a card. "Then yore substitute don't want you to know and it ain't my place to tell you. All I can do is give you a hint. Ever hear tell of Prof Westcott?"

"Prof Westcott! I get your drift, Sheriff, but I can't believe it. That man today was a gunman, a real gunman."

"Wa-al, I ain't sayin' it was Westcott," Bohler amended lazily.

"I guess we understand each other, Sheriff," Wade said after a moment's reflection. "I won't press the point. What I'm concerned about is whether the Big Boss knew all about me, too."

"Tain't likely," the sheriff opined with a shake of his head. "Who do you suppose the Big Boss is?"

"Deputize me and you'll have him in jail in less than an hour!"

The cards slipped from Bohler's fingers. "You mean that?" he demanded, his small eyes glittering.

Wade groped into a pocket, slapped an envelope on the desk—the envelope he'd addressed to Buck that morning.

"His name's in this," he announced. "And enough evidence to hang him. It took a lot of hard work to figure him out and I only saw the answer this morning. I want to be the man who arrests him. How about it?"

For an answer, Bohler opened a desk drawer. His exploring fingers brought out a glittering badge and a battered Bible which he tossed to the desk-top, scattering the cards in wild disarray. The sheriff slowly pulled himself erect.

"Wade Mavity," he began. "Rise your right hand and repeat this oath after me. . . ."

CHAPTER XXVI

The Big Boss

WADE had been a deputy for half-an-hour when he emerged from the Stockmen's Bank. Now his badge was not in evidence. He'd used it in his business with Jud Godfrey and, with that task performed, had concealed it before starting up the street.

Trudging along, he reflected that his work in Morling was nearly done. He had fought to defeat the Big Boss and his outlaw legion but with the hour of triumph at hand, the cup of victory was bitter. Restoring peace to the Frying Flats had brought him Judy's contempt.

True, he could go to her now and vindicate himself. But while his heart urged him to do so, his pride balked. She'd shown little faith in him, he argued. Man-like, he forgot that she'd only had his actions by which to judge him.

He toyed with the thought of returning East. Morling, with Judy, would be a satisfactory ending to any trail but Morling, without Judy, would be a perpetual reminder of vain regrets. Far better to put the past behind and forget the eventful weeks on the Frying Flats by plunging into his old life again. Abreast of the *Clarion* office, his decision was cemented. He was going to leave and, in characteristic manner, he decided to complete all unfinished business at once.

He turned to climb the stairs leading to Lennox's office. He had news for the lawyer but his mind was still busy with his gloomy thoughts as he ascended. The office door was ajar and he stepped inside. Lennox's desk was deserted. Wade's roving glance noted that the railing had been repaired and all other evidence of his noctural battle with Dorgan removed.

Wade's footsteps announced him. Lennox spoke from the ante-room. "Who's there?" he called.

"Mavity. I'd like to see you for a minute."

The door opened and the tall figure of the lawyer stepped into the main office, a stuffed brief-case under his arm. He tossed it to the desk-top. "I was just leaving for Malta. A client up there seems to think he needs me urgently. Anything special, Wade?"

"I'm riding to Pass Junction this afternoon," Wade announced. He backed to the low railing, leaned against it. "Thought I'd drop in and say good-bye."

"Good-bye?" Lennox echoed. "Surely you're not leaving?"

"I've finished my job in Morling. There's nothing to keep me here."

"You puzzle me, son," the lawyer confessed. "When you took over the *Clarion,* I hoped that it meant you were here to stay. What changed your mind?"

"The newspaper was only a blind to cover my real job."

"Your real job?"

Wade studied the lawyer's face from beneath half-closed eyelids. Lennox's interest was genuine. Wade wondered then if Lennox, like the sheriff, had suspected the truth. "Did you ever wonder," he asked, "what Bart's box contained?"

"Why, no," Lennox stammered. Perplexity furrowed his brow. "It was no concern of mine. Why?"

"I'll tell you," Wade continued. "The box held the garments of Black-Mask. Bart was the original Black-Mask, Lennox. My heritage was to carry on in his place."

Lennox swept a hand before his eyes, shook his head till the sunlight, filtering through the window, danced across his silver mane. "Bart—Black-Mask!" he murmured. "I can't believe that, son. A fighting justice-rider? Never . . ."

"It's true," Wade insisted and found himself enjoying the lawyer's astonishment immensely. "And I've been pinch-hitting for him since."

"Then who done the shooting out on the street today? Who rode away with Dorgan?"

"I don't know," Wade confessed. "One party hereabouts seems to think

Prof Westcott was taking a hand."

Lennox sank limply into the chair behind his desk. "Amazing! Unbelievably amazing! To think you were Black-Mask. It's almost incredible, son."

"That's the yarn in a nutshell," Wade said. "You're in a hurry so I didn't bother with details but it all leads up to why I'm returning East. My job was to identify the Big Boss, put the Injun sign on him."

"And you did that! I want to congratulate you," Lennox cried. "Tell me, who was the Big Boss?"

WADE eased himself upon the railing. "You'd never guess," he grinned. "The Boss covered himself well, Lennox. He fooled me for a long time. In fact, I picked out just about everybody but the right man. I started by suspicioning Lawson Kemp because he acted queer when I questioned him about Black-Mask. But Kemp was murdered the first night I was in Morling. Next, I had my finger on the sheriff but Bohler showed his brand when he jailed the rustlers yesterday on my tip. Klein was on my list, too, but he was small fry. Greg Decker and his 'Eastern Syndicate' didn't smell right either, but Decker's dead—from a rustler's bullet. I even began to suspect Prof Westcott since he kept himself under cover. It wasn't any of them."

"You didn't overlook anyone, it seems."

"Little Shaw told me the Big Boss wanted control of the Flats," Wade continued. "Shaw was an oil man, imported by the Big Boss to check up on the section since our mystery man had a hunch this was oil land. It seems Shaw made a report to the Boss telling him his hunch was right. Then the Big Boss started making things hot around here."

Incredulity again gripped Lennox. "What's this?" he interjected. "Do you mean to say there's oil around here?"

"Lot's of it," Wade confirmed. "That's just why the Big Boss started getting a grip on the ranches one by one."

"So that's why Dorgan looted my safe!" Lennox gasped. "The Crippled X mortgage was the only thing I found missing. The Boss sent him after it!"

"You're partly right," Wade allowed. He leaned forward. "The chief reason your office was raided was because the Big Boss wasn't ready to show his hand just yet. He was afraid people might be getting onto his little game so he ordered Dorgan to break in here and get the mortgage as a move to cover up the Boss."

"Cover the Boss? I don't understand."

"Then I'll explain," Wade snapped. "I came here the same night as Dorgan. You heard about that, of course. I wanted to protect the mortgage for your sake. I searched your desk, hoping to find it. All I found was some papers which I took in my haste. I forgot about them afterwards since they didn't concern me. This morning I decided to mail them to Buck with instructions to return them to you. Only then did I examine them. One of the papers I found in your office was the oil report given by Shaw to the Big Boss. Then I knew that Dorgan raided your office to divert suspicion from yourself. *You're under arrest, Mr. Big Boss!*"

The echo of his voice lingered in the room. Lennox gazed at him, mouth agape, incredulity and chagrin mingling on the lawyer's face. He swallowed rapidly without speaking then laughed uneasily. "Ridiculous!" he said at last.

"That's what I'd have thought not long ago," Wade admitted, "but the cards are all against you." He flipped his vest, disclosing his hidden badge.

"I just stopped in and showed this badge to Jud Godfrey. It cooled his reluctance to tell me a few things I wanted to know. He admitted that you'd been playing fairy godfather to half the country. Everytime a mortgage fell due, you stepped in and bought it up, just like you did for the Crippled X."

"That's true," Lennox slowly confessed. "I've extended a hand to many a friend but I never thought such kindness would bring suspicion upon me."

"Save that talk," Wade advised him scornfully. "I'll bet that brief-case is stuffed with mortgages. You were getting ready to skip out till you organized another band of gun-slingers. You were afraid Dorgan might give you away since he and Black-Mask had joined together. That's why you took a shot at him from your window just as he was riding from town. Why, man alive, you never knew I had your oil report till I told you so! You'd ordered Dorgan to go straight to your safe so you never thought to see if your desk had been molested!"

PASSION contorted Lennox's face and in that moment he stripped his mask and all pretense was gone. Wade, looking into his hate-filled eyes, marveled that he'd never suspected this man's true character before. Like Bart Mavity, Lennox had been a clever actor. Each had lived a dual life, presenting one personality outwardly, living an entirely different character. One for good—one for evil.

"It's all true," Lennox sneered. "You're a very smart young man, Mavity—a worthy nephew of your uncle. You both fooled me completely. Bart and his peace-talk! I never dreamed he was Black-Mask so I never suspected you might be interested. You played a pretty clever game."

His right hand seemed restless. It caressed the stuffed brief-case. "You're right. This is full of mortgages—the winning cards—for with them I could easily get more men to enforce the foreclosures I'd soon be making. I'll still control the Frying Flats. You see, you had all the answers. But in ten seconds they're not going to be worth anything. You'll be dead!"

Only then did Wade sense that Lennox had been talking for a purpose, talking to distract his attention. Now that restless right hand of the lawyer's was diving into a desk drawer. And in that moment, strangely, Wade remembered many things but most of all he remembered the night Shaw had died, the night he'd swapped lead with the Big Boss, recognized the man's gun-prowess.

And Wade knew a certain sense of elation because all his arduous hours at gun-practice had not been in vain. He'd trained himself for a battle with Dorgan. Another had fought Dorgan instead. But a gun-test was here for the facing. Phineas Lennox's hand was jerking into sight again and a forty-five was gripped in it.

CHAPTER XXVII

Black-Mask Unmasks

IN THE guise of Black-Mask, Wade had faced danger often. Now, with Phineas Lennox leveling a gun at him, Wade had reached the end of the justice-riding trail only to find himself in the toughest tight of all. Lennox could shoot. He'd proved it. The gun at Wade's hip seemed a million miles away at that moment.

That unwavering gun-barrel was a

yawning black tunnel, big as all outdoors. Lurching sideways, Wade saw it belch flame. Lead tugged at his sleeve and his own impetus sent him smashing against the low railing and he deliberately let himself fall backwards over it. But even as he slammed against the floor he was clawing at his holster and a gun was in his hand.

He didn't take time to remember the things he'd taught himself about the gun-craft. He didn't take time to hope that some part of Bart Mavity's wizardry had been passed to him. He didn't even take time to aim. Yet the gun bucked and a bullet clipped a wisp of silver hair from Lennox's head.

But Lennox was old at this game. Dancing and weaving, he fired again, the bullet gashing the floor near Wade's head, driving a splinter into his cheek. It brought tears to Wade's eyes and it did something else to him, sending an overmastering rage to fire his veins. He came to his feet as though catapulted and the very audacity of it disconcerted Lennox for a second. That was all Wade needed. He fired again. Lennox clutched his right shoulder, tried to level his gun.

Wade was over the railing and sprawling across the desk instantly, a wild dive that hurled him against Lennox, bringing the two of them to the floor in a tangle of arms and legs. But with his fingers seeking Lennox's throat, it came to Wade that the man was unconscious beneath him. Lennox's head had struck the floor. Wade hadn't wanted that. With his wrath still flaming he wanted Lennox in full possession of his strength so he could measure out to the man some small part of the misery Lennox had dealt to all the rangeland.

Someone was knocking at the office door, a heavy, commanding clamor. Shaking the mist from his eyes, Wade picked himself up, crossed and opened the door. The rotund form of Sheriff Vic Bohler stepped inside. The lawman ran calculating eyes from the inert figure on the floor to the disheveled newsman before him.

Wade unpinned the deputy badge, passed it to Bohler. "Like I explained to you, I didn't want you barging in till I was ready for you," Wade said. "Catching Lennox cost me a lot. I figured I was entitled to play cat-and-mouse with him for awhile."

He stepped to the desk, snatched up the brief-case and tucked it under his arm. "You shouldn't need these to convince a jury of his guilt. I'll just steal a page from the Big Boss's book of methods and take what I want."

On the floor Phineas Lennox stirred, muttered something that sounded like a feeble protest. Vic Bohler methodically kicked the lawyer's discarded gun into a far corner. "Shut up!" the sheriff snapped. "Maybe you bought some of them papers. But I'm bettin' that pack of sidewinders of yourn got most of 'em for you. Restorin' stolen property ain't no crime and that's just what young Mavity figgers on doin'. I ain't stoppin' him. Time is when justice's more important 'n law."

He turned to Wade. "You can run along if you want, son," he said kindly. "Me, I'll be takin' this prisoner out of the county pronto. Was the ranchers to find out about him, feelin' as they do now, I shouldn't wonder but what this varmint 'd be danglin' from a cottonwood come sundown."

THE two shook hands. From Bohler Wade learned that Buck Callahan had been moved to Morling the previous afternoon. Here was a last piece of unfinished business and Wade, on the street again, sought the efficient-looking medico who attended Buck. The cowboy was well on the road to recovery, he was told. The puncher was deep

in noisy slumber and Wade tiptoed from Buck's room without disturbing him. It would have been mighty hard to say good-bye to Buck.

Again in the saddle, Wade put Morling behind and took the old familiar trail to the northeast, the brief-case, practically stolen from Lennox, hanging from his saddlehorn. Urging his horse across the sage-speckled prairie, Wade mentally re-lived the last hour.

Even now with the Big Boss exposed, it seemed incredible that Lennox had been the man. But Wade himself had found Shaw's oil report in the lawyer's office. Also, he'd been a violent participant in Lennox's mad break for freedom when faced with his crimes. Wade had peeped into the brief-case and found the Crippled X mortgage there. That was the final and clinching piece of evidence. Dorgan had merely stolen the paper from Lennox, then returned it to his chief.

Not far out of Morling Wade glimpsed a weary posse returning from the south. Grinning broadly, he waved a hand at the distant riders. These were the men who had pursued Dorgan and the psuedo Black-Mask. Wade wondered just what sort of merry chase the pair had led them.

It swiveled his mind again to that unknown who had substituted for him in that grim rendezvous with Trigger Dan. In the excitement of the past hour he'd almost forgotten that person but the man returned to crowd his thoughts for the substitute Black-Mask was now the only piece of the puzzle that hadn't been fitted into place. He remembered Vic Bohler's hint. But could Prof Westcott have handled a gun as the stranger had handled one this day?

Wade didn't know but a hunch grew upon him that he'd find the two fugitives at the secret cabin hideout in the Sawtooths. The masked man knew of the place. He'd been there the night before. Perhaps he'd headed there again, circling to outwit the posse. Wade prodded his cayuse along the trail. Before he left the Flats he wanted to thank the man who'd taken his place—and he wanted to see his face.

His premonition was correct. Approaching the hideout, he made no effort at silence and when he loped into view the masked rider was framed in the doorway. Behind him loomed Dorgan's mighty form. Trigger Dan grinned a welcome.

"Howdy, kid," he said. "Light down and meet a friend of yourn."

And then, unaccountably, Wade found himself trembling and a feeling was strong upon him that the incredible was about to take place. He swung from his horse, stepped into the cabin. Dorgan swung the door shut and the unknown chuckled behind his mask. "I had a hunch you'd be along," he said in that muffled voice of his. "You're about eaten away with curiosity, too, aren't you? That's why I couldn't resist keeping up the theatricals till the last."

Raising his hands, he slipped the mask from his face.

Wade stared. The man wore a heavy beard that served to conceal his identity almost as completely as though he'd remained masked. Peering at the smiling face before him, Wade mentally stripped the disguising beard from the man's features. Then, with the dawning of recognition, the world swayed dizzily. He felt his knees grow rubbery beneath him. Jaw sagging, he tried to force speech as he gazed, hypnotized.

"Easy there, boy," the other said and alarm crossed his bearded face. He extended a hand to steady Wade. "I didn't realize I would shock you so. I thought you would have guessed the truth in Morling."

Now Wade found the key to speech.

"Bart!" he muttered incoherently. "Bart . . . alive . . .!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

Turnabout Trail

THERE was a truth so staggering that Wade couldn't grasp it. Bart was alive! Wreckage at the Leaning Circle had given mute testimony of the devastating work of the dynamiters. Wade had stood beside his uncle's grave; heard details of the funeral from the Wynnes. Yet Bart was alive. All the sane things became mockeries in the face of the fact.

He tried to collect his scattered faculties. But just as his mind had refused to accept the suggestion that Bart was alive when he'd seen the substitute Black-Mask in Morling, so was this flesh-and-blood proof too incredible for belief.

"I—can't—understand," Wade began weakly. "Your grave . . ."

Bart's hand was a reassuring weight on Wade's shoulder. "It's really very simple, Wade. The body of my friend Professor Westcott fills my grave. It was his mangled body they found in my shack. I'd stepped outside just before the explosion occurred."

Wade groped for a chair, seated himself. Bart drew another chair close beside him.

"I was badly wounded by the concussion which hurled me some distance," Bart explained. "I managed to crawl away for I figured the dynamiters would stay to investigate. I succeeded in getting myself on a horse and headed for the hills. I don't remember slipping from the horse but when I recovered my senses I was in the cabin of a prospector who'd found me stretched on the ground. I've been staying with him ever since.

"I can easily understand why Westcott was mistaken for me. The body was probably mangled beyond identification. Westcott had announced his intention of leaving the range soon. When folks found only one body at the Leaning Circle, they naturally presumed it was mine."

Wade's eyes lighted as a pattern took shape. "Now I savvy what the sheriff was hinting at," he interjected. "He was trying to tell me Prof Westcott was dead instead of you."

"Did the sheriff know the truth?" Bart asked. "It wouldn't surprise me. Bohler was probably the first man to reach the shack that night and he might have noticed some mark of identification, such as a ring, upon the corpse. Being tight-mouthed about important things is second nature with Vic."

"Small wonder I couldn't locate Prof Westcott," Wade observed. "But why did you keep under cover all this time?"

"I'd expected the rustlers would strike at me," Bart explained. "I'm positive they never suspected I was the original Black-Mask but they did suspect I was taking too active an interest in their affairs. I'd taken the box containing your heritage to my old friend, Lennox. When my benefactor, the prospector, made his rare visits to town I cautioned him not to mention me. He brought news that Black-Mask was definitely in the saddle. Then I knew you'd accepted your heritage and wanted to go to your aid but I was still too weak.

"Only last night I ventured into Morling for the first time, trusting that my beard would disguise me. Learning of your bargain with Dorgan, I went to the Leaning Circle expecting to find you there. The ranch was deserted, the

buildings destroyed by fire. Long ago I'd buried Black-Mask regalia beneath the bunkhouse floor and I unearthed it, came directly here. I swapped horses with you and hid in the hills till morning."

Bart relaxed, his story told. Now the impossible had been proved possible and Wade's dazed feeling gave way to a surge of joy.

"There are times when words just can't get an idea across," he said sincerely. His hand went out to meet Bart's firm grip. "All I can say now, Bart, is that I'm damn glad you're back. But tell me, why didn't you show yourself last night?"

BART grinned. In spite of his beard he was like his nephew in many ways. The years had touched the fighting scholar lightly. His were the slender hips and wide shoulders of his youth and only a few lines etched his patrician features.

"Would you have let me meet Dorgan today if you could have stopped me?" he asked.

"It was my job—my heritage," Wade observed. "I began the chore you left me. I would have tried finishing it."

"And that's just what you'd have done if I'd showed my hand last night. I had to meet Dorgan myself, Wade, sooner or later."

"You mean—?"

Bart nodded. "I too have tasted the gun, my boy. I thought I was bigger than that but I lived to learn my mistake. I had to meet Dorgan today because I have wondered which of us is the better man."

Taste of the gun! Wade glanced from face to face, studying these two men who had known that strange mania. "I'm sorry," he said simply.

"Don't be," Bart said. "Black-Mask is dead."

Wade smiled at his uncle. "That's what you said twenty years ago. If a shot sounded out on the Flats you'd be into your saddle and on your way to take a hand."

Bart shook his head. Was there sadness in the gesture? "Black-Mask is dead," he insisted. His bandaged right hand raised in a futile gesture. "This hand will heal up in fine fashion but I'll never be able to draw a gun with any speed again. I can thank Dan for this. His bullet freed me forever."

Bart's left hand came forward, groped for his nephew's shoulder. "You did your job well. You were born to the saddle, son, and you've proved you belong here. Dorgan and I have made our peace but he will not betray the man who once was his master. Tell me, Wade, can you unmask the Big Boss?"

Wade winced. He knew the friendship that Phineas Lennox had pretended for Bart. Yet now, in clipped sentences, he told of this day's doings. He tried to ease the blow by making his account sketchy. Bart, listening in silence, sat immobile for many minutes afterwards.

"Lennox," he finally murmured. "And yet, is it so strange? When we learn a truth we wonder why we didn't see it before. I can understand the reasons for Phineas' villainy."

"What are they?" Wade demanded. "That's what I can't get into my head. He lived here for years, building up respect and trust and a fine name. Why did he throw those things away?"

"Because he didn't feel that such things, in themselves, were sufficient reward for the years he'd spent obtaining them," Bart explained softly. "Discovering that oil existed on the Flats gave him a glimpse of wealth and power and that glimpse grew into an obsession. He began insiduously ruining the ranchers and capitalized on his here-

tofore useless reputation for honesty by pretending to save those same ranchers when they were on the verge of ruin."

Wade shook his head in wonder. "To think he held the garb of Black-Mask and turned it over to me, never knowing!"

Bart smiled. "Luck favored you then, Wade. If Lennox had known, your doom would have been speedily sealed. A bit of irony, eh? I gave Lennox the box because he'd fooled me and I trusted him. He kept it unopened because I'd fooled him and he never suspected."

Dorgan, a silent listener, put in a remark. "That's right. Lennox used to say he feared only two men and one of them was dead. He meant Bart Mavity and Black-Mask."

Wade passed the brief-case over to his uncle, explained its contents. "I want you to return these papers to the people who'll need them," Wade said. "I'm going East today."

"Going East?" Bart echoed in surprise. "Why?"

"I can't tell you, Bart," Wade said.

Strangely enough, his uncle accepted the answer. Wade wondered if Bart somehow suspected the truth. If this were the case, Bart apparently respected his nephew's feelings too much to probe into the matter.

And now that the die had been cast, Wade knew an urge to be on his way. He'd met his uncle only to part with him, but someday, when time had healed the wound he'd carry with him, Wade would return for a visit. That was his unspoken promise when he swung into the saddle. Dorgan extended his unwounded hand. "Goodbye, younker," Trigger Dan said soberly. "Till the trails cross again. I got no way of knowing where mine 'll take me. You made a damn good Black-Mask, kid."

BART too extended his left hand. Uncle and nephew gripped for a long moment. "Take care of Buck for me?" Wade asked.

"He'll be my range-boss," Bart promised.

Wade wheeled his horse. "So long . . . Black-Mask," he tried to shout but his voice sounded unreal. A jerk of the reins headed the cayuse for the mountain pass.

As long as he looked back he saw the two standing before the cabin. Trigger Dan and Bart! Fighting men, allied at last by the very kinship of their enmity. Concealing trees shut off the view all too quickly and Wade felt a strange loneliness when the cabin slipped out of sight.

Skirting the mountains he headed south, the monotonous miles sliding behind. Almost before he was aware of them, the towering walls of the pass loomed on either side. This was the same route he and Buck had followed when they'd lumbered onto the Flats in a buckboard not many weeks before. Wade had been intensely alive to the beauties of the trail that day. Now he rode with lowered eyes. Odor of pine and fir filled his nostrils but it only served to remind him that he was leaving this magic land behind.

Where the foothills sheltered Pass Junction the sound of galloping hoofs on the back trail reached his ears. His hand, motivated by habit, jerked to his thigh, dropped again.

The drumming hoofs grew closer. Wade, gazing back, saw nothing for a turn of the trail hid the coming rider from view. His own horse plodded onward. That racing horseman could hold no interest for him. He did not raise his eyes until the galloping mount was abreast of his own.

The setting sun, slanting between the hills, flamed in the reddish glint of Judy Wynne's disheveled hair as her

horse blocked his way. "Wade!" she cried.

He gazed at her in unfeigned astonishment, noticed her foam-flecked mount. "Judy!" he exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

"Catching up with you," she explained almost curtly but there was a hazy film of tears in her eyes. "I wanted to . . . to give you this to take along . . ."

She thrust a hand before him, opened it. A wisp of black cloth caught in the breeze, unfurled—a black mask.

Wade gasped. "Where did you get that?" he demanded.

"Bart gave it to me," was her amazing reply.

"Bart! You've seen him? You know . . .?"

"I know Bart is alive. I met him on the prairie right after you left and he told me everything. He was coming to the Crippled X to find me. Dorgan had learned how . . . how I felt about you from the Big Boss and he told Bart about it."

Her words flashed Wade's memory back to the day he'd told Lennox of Judy's contempt for him, Wade.

"Oh, Wade," the girl went on, her voice tremulous. "What a fool I've been. To think I called you coward and you were taking Black-Mask's place. . . . I could have crawled after you today only"—a roguish smile set her blue eyes dancing—"I'd never have caught you before you were on the train. I want you to know I'm sorry for what I said, Wade; terribly sorry."

These were the words Wade had longed to hear but he felt ill at ease as they came tumbling out. "You couldn't know," he stammered.

"That isn't any excuse," she flared in self-denunciation. "I had no right to criticize, regardless." Her eyes lowered. "I guess I expected too much, Wade. It isn't my place to tell you why I did, but I owe you that much and more. I love you, Wade. That's why it riled me when you didn't seem to be concerned with the fight of my people. Now do you savvy?"

The same Wade who'd lashed the men of Morling to fighting fervor with the power of his tongue found himself speechless. Joy was welling within him, yet he might have been a schoolboy caught with his lessons unprepared.

Raising his eyes, he saw her extended hand. "I know it's still good-bye," she said huskily. "Please shake hands, Wade."

She looked like a little girl trying bravely to take a deserved reprimand. Her lips were trembling and the sight of them loosed something inside Wade, brought words rushing to his own lips.

"Good-bye!" he shouted. "You'll never say that to me again, Judy. We're riding back to Morling, savvy, to give a sky-pilot a job. Then I'll ask Bart for a corner of the Leaning Circle. We'll build a ranch-house a mile long and a mile wide." His fervor inspired a new thought. "We'll make the *Clarion* the best paper in Montana, you and I. We'll start right now. The big gun-fight and the exposure of the Big Boss calls for an extra! Let's be riding, darling!"

She smiled at his outburst, then pretended to pout. "Wade," she reminded him. "You haven't told me you love me, yet."

Their horses had fell to cropping and they were very close to each other. Wade leaned, took the girl in his arms. "On second thought," he added, between kisses, "the extra can wait. Having you for a sweetheart is a new job for me. Since it's going to be the most important, I'd rather spend the rest of the day getting onto the ropes."

END.

Boothill Bait for Badmen

By GUNNISON STEELE

Author of "He'll Die Fighting Hot-Lead," etc.

The grim-eyed possemen who hammered those gun-dogs' backtrail would need more than hot lead to bring them back for the hangnoose!

OLD Adam Pelly stood before his log ranch house and watched the car's progress along the wagon road from Yaqui Gap.

The dusty, powerful auto skidded to a halt a few yards from Adam. The two men in the front seat were young,

"Hi, granddad," said the slender, redhaired man. "You got any grub, old man?"

"Plenty," nodded Adam. "Light down—"

Adam stopped. The two had guns in their hands. They climbed stiffly from the auto, the automatics pointing at Adam.

"Step lively," Tonto snapped, looking toward a corral that held several powerful animals. "Get this, old man. A little while ago me and Jake stuck up the Yaqui Gap bank. We've got a good start on that hick sheriff that'll be trailin' us. But we ain't saps enough to think we can get away in this car. Too many ways to cut us off and hem us. We're ditchin' it, tradin' it to you for some horses."

"What you aimin' to do?"

"Cross Big Windy desert into Mexico. We planned it a month ago. It's fool-proof. We been watchin' this place; we knew you had horses and water here. The posse'll be trailin' us in cars. But we'll switch to horses here and strike into the desert. They'll have to stop, and before they can get horses to follow us we'll be in Mexico."

Adam Pelly said nothing. He watched as Jake took saddles, bridles, a couple of canteens and a bulging canvas sack from the car. The sack had YAQUI GAP STOCKMAN'S BANK stamped on it. They must have cleaned the bank out, Adam thought.

"Saddle a coupla them best horses, gran'dad," Jake ordered.

Adam obeyed, his fat face impassive. He saddled two of his best horses, then watched as Tonto opened the corral gate, drove out the rest of the animals and scattered them over the alkali flat below the cabin.

"We *are* hungry," said Tonto. "And we got plenty time to eat before that sap sheriff shows up. Gran'dad, we'll just let you cook us up some grub!"

In the house, they confiscated Adam's only weapon, an old Sharps buffalo gun. Then Tonto snapped. "Now get busy on that grub. And one wrong move, and you'll get what that chump back there in the bank got!"

Adam, a slab of bacon in his hand, paused. "Did you gents kill somebody?" he asked.

Tonto laughed, and Jake said, "Sure—a whiskery, goat-faced old fellow. When we told him to shell out, he grabbed for a gun. So I let him have it between the eyes. It was kinda funny, the way his toes curled up."

Old Adam seemed stunned. "Bill Tolley," he whispered. "Bill was a swell gent, and harmless. For more'n

thirty years me and Bill was pards. You gents hadn't ought to have shot Bill like that."

"That's too bad!" Tonto sneered. "You get busy on that grub!"

Adam went about preparing the meal, that dazed light still in his eyes.

"I like plenty salt in my vittles, gran'dad," he heard Jake say. "You got any salt?"

"Plenty salt," Adam said vaguely. "A full four-pound bag." And he put a dish of it on the table in front of Jake.

Once headed into the desert on fresh horses, Adam realized, Jake and Tonto would be gone. They'd planned well. Sheriff Jim Flint and his deputies, without horses, would be helpless. Cars wouldn't go in the desert sands. Loss of the bank money would likely ruin some folks. And these two had murdered Bill Tolley.

The meal cooked, Tonto and Jake started wolfing the food.

"You get them two canteens outside, old man," Tonto ordered. "Fill 'em up with water and hang 'em on the saddles. Save time. By bein' careful, that water'll last us across the desert. Jump, blast you!"

Anger stirred inside Adam. But he waddled outside, took the two two-gallon canteens to the deep well at the back of the cabin and filled them. Four gallons of water, he knew, would barely last two men across the desert. Anybody trying to cross Big Windy without water would be doomed.

He slung the full canteens from the saddlehorns, and by that time Tonto and Jake had come outside. Tonto lifted the canteens, to see that they were full, then he and Jake swung into the saddles. They looked grinningly down at old Adams.

"So long, chump!" said Jake. "When them sap lawmen show up, tell 'em they'll have to comb the burrs outa their whiskers before they'll be smart enough to catch two gents like us!"

Then they rode away, heading due south into the heat-lashed, waterless wastes of Big Windy desert. Adam watched till the heat waves swallowed them, then sat down on the rickety porch to wait for the trailing posse.

And fifteen minutes later two cars, loaded with grim-eyed possemen, bounced along the wagon trail and stopped before Adam Pelly's log house. They saw the powerful car, and guns were in their hands. They looked suspiciously from Adam, calmly smoking his pipe on the porch, to the cabin's interior.

"The two gents who was in that car," said Sheriff Jim Flint. "Where are they?"

"Gone," said Adam. "Into the desert."

"On hosses?"

Adam nodded, and the sheriff said dejectedly, "Then that settles it. Even if we had hosses we couldn't catch 'em before they cross into Mexico. Never was two skunks needed hangin' worse. They cleaned out the bank, and killed old Bill Tolley. Now they'll get clean away, and with all the bank's money."

Adam puffed thoughtfully. "Maybe they won't," he said.

The grizzled sheriff asked quickly, "You been up to somethin', Adam?"

"Sort of," Adam admitted, and grinned. "Them two won't go very far. They'll have to turn back purty quick, or you'll find their bones out there in Big Windy, the bank money with 'em. You see, Tonto and Jake liked plenty salt—and I had a whole four-pound bagful."

"Salt?" the sheriff asked puzzedly.

Old Adam nodded slowly. "When I went out after the water, I poured that whole bagful of salt into the canteens!"

Lucky Lawman—

THIS Carl Veblen came down out of the Ozarks and by the time he reached the Big Bend of Texas a lot of things had happened. Two banks in Oklahoma and three filling-stations in Texas had been stuck up—and then Veblen was dead, shot by a runty little Sheriff with a rusty gun in one of the tank towns along the S. P.

Sheriff Bob Bruce wasn't in his office when I got there from El Paso that night, so I hunted up the coroner to get the story. It was the story of a lucky shot, as far as I could see, and I wouldn't have bothered with the Sheriff except for one thing. The coroner told me this Sheriff Bob Bruce was forking sixty-seven dollars out of his own pocket to get Veblen's body back to his people. So I waited for the Sheriff to show up.

Again the bandits had escaped the hot-lead of the posse!

When he did, I put it up to him, and

SMASHING NEW RANGE-WAR NOVELETTE FRESH FROM PEN OF THIS

or Gun-King?

By PETER DAWSON

Author of "The Raider From the Roost," etc.

This gent was in the habit of packing those two big Colts all right, because his trousers were shiny where the holsters had rubbed—Russ Ordway had maybe got his chance to rid the country of its mangiest killer, but he'd also earned the right to face the range's deadliest six-guns!

I was looking for one of these vote-pulling explanations, especially because Bruce was a mild little man with a bald head who loved to suck wet cigars.

"You paid to ship him back. Got a statement on that?"

"No."

"I'll print it. Let's have one."

"I just wanted to, that's all."

"You could bury him here. He was a rat."

"Maybe. Maybe not, too."

"Why maybe not?"

"You can't always tell. I can't."

"You don't look blind."

"I was once. I proved myself wrong."

"When was that?"

"It'd take a long time telling."

"Go ahead. I've got four hours."

"All right, pull up a chair."

"This time I speak of was a winter nearly thirty years ago, up in New Mexico. A feller by the name of Ordway, Russ Ordway, who homesteaded one of those valleys high up under the peaks of the Sangre de Cristos, was headed home from a town we'll call Los Pintos one night when he run into trouble in a blizzard.

You know the mountain winters. The snow is bad enough, but when it comes down with one of those howlin' high winds off the peaks, it's hell. It was that kind of a storm Russ Ordway rode into, the snow belly deep to his pony in places and plenty of times when he couldn't see his hand before his face. But he tied his hat on with his bandanna and turned his sheepskin up about his face, and on his way in through the hills he took to the canyons where he could and once in the timber he wouldn't let his horse go on until he made sure where he was. Even at that he had a hell of a ride. He'd pound his hands to keep out the frostbite and now and then he'd get out of

the saddle.

A mile or so short of his place, while he was following the bed of a wash to keep out of the wind, he come to a place where the bank had caved in and let down a couple of tons of dirt and rock. And as he was riding past the slide, he thought he saw something move. He looked closer. There, laying half buried under the muck, was a horse and rider. The horse had a busted foreleg and was dead from a bullet through the head. And the feller was laying all doubled up and with one leg caught under the carcass, an empty pistol in his hand and a pile of maybe fifty empty shell-cases off to one side of him. He'd done his best to call help and all he could do now was move one arm, the one that held the gun.

Russ got to work on him, first trying to get the gun out of his hand. But the fingers was stiff and the frame was froze to the skin. That's what made Russ hurry. He snubbed his rope to his saddle and dragged the carcass off the feller and then got him on his feet. But he couldn't stand, so Russ piled him onto his own saddle and roped him into it and headed for home, leading his pony.

YOU wouldn't think he would have got lost, this close to his place. But he did and it was better than an hour before he come onto his pasture and made the cabin damn' near froze to death himself. The first thing he did was to get this feller inside out of the storm. He laid him on the floor and lit up a lamp and tilted the reflector down to have a look at what he'd dragged home.

It wasn't much. A stranger, a lanky jasper in a smeared canvas windbreaker and a dirty pair of trousers and a grimy flannel shirt missin' half the buttons. Maybe that's where Russ took his first dislike to the feller, when he saw he was so untidy. Russ never had much, but his duds was always clean and neatly patched. He used to say that a man didn't have the same excuse as a hog for being dirty, since he had two hands to clean himself with.

The stranger's face didn't tell him much. The mouth looked weak and there wasn't much of a chin and his hair was stringy and black and didn't look like it had often seen a comb.

But what did tell Russ something was the guns, the one in the feller's hand and the other in the pair of holsters he had buckled around his waist. In them days and in that country, men didn't often pack irons. Oh, maybe they'd have one handy early in the summer when the rattlers was mean, but ordinarily they never used a sidearm unless they was in trouble. This feller's trousers was shiny along the thighs where the holsters had rubbed, which made it plain that he was in the habit of packin' those two big Colts. A man that wore guns the same as he did his clothes was either a peace officer or plain bad. And this stranger wasn't no peace officer.

But here he was, passed out and maybe dying from the cold, and Russ was kind-hearted. He laid a fire in the stove and took his washtub down off the nail behind the door and went out and filled the tub with snow. He come back in and peeled off the feller's pants and shirt and set to work rubbing the frost-bite out of his arms and legs with the snow. In about half an hour the stranger opened his eyes and began breathing right and moaning a little.

Russ lifted him into a chair and threw a blanket around him and pushed him over to the stove, not too close, understand, for too much heat can play hell with frost-bite. Russ had bought a quart bottle of whiskey in town and now he went out to get it off the pack

behind his saddle. His horse was worrying him, standing out there in the storm, but he figured bringing this feller around right was more important.

When he come in again the first thing he saw was the empty chair. Then he seen the stranger standing against the wall by the stove with the blanket wrapped around him and his two guns in his hands. Them guns was pointed square at the door, which meant square at Russ.

"I'm leavin'," the stranger said. He spoke low, in a sort of growl that meant business. "Partner, you're goin' to do as I say. Throw me my duds."

Russ had never had a gun pointed at him. He was scared. He was so scared he forgot to kick the door shut when he edged out to pick up the feller's clothes and throw them across to him.

For a minute the stranger didn't move but stood there sizing Russ up, his mouth down at the corners in a sneer that looked like his natural expression. His eyes were a watery blue, cold-looking, like they hadn't thawed out with the rest of him.

Finally he laughed, thinking that Russ was so scared he didn't have much to worry about. "Stay set," he says, and he took a step out from the wall and reached down for his trousers.

Something happened then. His right leg buckled under him and he made a grab for the nearest hold, the stove pipe. He caught it. It was hot and he let out a yell. But he held on and then him and the stove pipe went down together. The pipe rolled away but the feller lay where he was, not moving.

Smoke and soot bellied out into the room. Russ ran across and yanked the guns out of this feller's hands and then saw he'd passed out again, his face a sick yellow.

Russ dropped the two pistols into the pockets of his sheepskin and picked up the stove-pipe with his gloves and put it back in place. He left the door open for the place to air out and lugged the stranger over to his bunk and put him in under some blankets. The stranger looked bad. Russ remembered that right leg and had a look at it. Nothing was busted but the ankle looked swollen after the boot was off.

WORKING like he had, Russ hadn't had the time to get sore. But now he did. He got the bottle of whiskey and poured some down the feller's throat and then shook him and slapped his face until he come to, gaggin' at the bite in the whiskey.

When he saw Russ, his eyes went shifty and afraid and he edged up as far toward the head of the bunk as he could.

Then, even though Russ was riled, he felt a little pity for the feller, so he told him in a nice way, "Let's get this straight. You're about done up. You can't travel. I dont know who you are or why you want to get away. But you're safe here. So lay down and take it easy and wait while I get my lughead in out of the storm. Then I'll get you some supper."

Still the stranger didn't say nothing. He was acting damn' queer, Russ thought. So finally he went out, the stranger's guns still in his pockets. It was twenty minutes before he was back again. He found the feller asleep, plumb played out.

Russ cooked his supper and decided against waking the other and that night he bedded down on the floor, close to the stove.

The next day he had to wake the stranger for breakfast. "Feelin' any better?" he asked him. He could see that there wasn't no fever or any other bad signs.

"I'm all right."

The feller's voice sounded sullen and had an ugly edge to it, the same as last night. Russ handed him a plateful of food and went out to carry in water and wood, and then to the barn to fetch the rest of the things he'd brought from town last night. It was colder that day, below zero but with no wind. There was better than a foot of snow on the ground and Russ got the grain-scoop and cleared a path to the barn.

Each time he'd come in to warm by the stove he'd find the stranger looking at him that funny way, head down and out of the corners of his eyes, like he had a grudge against him. And he'd taken only a bite or two of the food, like it wasn't good enough to suit him.

"Hell, I ain't going to hurt you," Russ finally told him. Then, to show how he felt about it, he says, "You was half out of your head last night. Forget it. How's the ankle?"

"It's sore."

So Russ put a bucket of water on the stove. While it heated, he washed up the tin plates. Then when the water got hot, he carried it over to the bunk and set it on the floor and said, "Soak your foot in that," and pulled on his sheepskin, ready to go out again.

"Where you goin'?" the stranger asked. He was scowling and Russ had noticed a minute ago that the two pistols wasn't on the table where he'd left them last night.

"Down to the barn to load some hay and haul it out to pasture," Russ told him. "Why?"

"Where's the pasture?" the feller asked, quick-like.

Russ jerked his head toward the door. "Beyond the fence. Ten rod or so down the slope."

The stranger looked at him hard a minute and then down at his foot, which was in the bucket. "Go on," he said finally, in that same growl.

Russ was stumped. This feller hadn't had one word of thanks, nothing but sour looks. But Russ was peaceable by disposition and would walk ten miles to get away from trouble. He knew that if he opened up on the stranger now there would be trouble. So he went out to the barn and got to work.

HIS layout was in a three-acre clearing at the edge of an open valley. Timber, big yellow pines, and some aspen, ran all the way down the slopes to the edge of his pasture, which was maybe a quarter mile wide and not very long. His cabin and barn was of pine logs, the cabin only one room and the barn big, with a loft. He'd dug a surface well and thrown up a slab wood-shed and built him a corral of aspen poles, which was as big as the outfit got for years. The barn was fifty yards out toward the pasture, and from the loft-door Russ could look back and see the front of the cabin.

The air was still and cold and sounds carried sharp and clear, and once Russ thought he heard a faint noise coming from up there. When he looked toward the cabin it was to see the stranger standing at the window, looking out at him.

A couple of things hit Russ right then. First, he knew it was too cold at the window for a sick man to be standing by it. And because this stranger thought he had to keep an eye on him it meant he wasn't trusting him. This, along with all the belly-aching and those sour looks. It was too much for Russ. He climbed down out of the loft and walked up to the cabin, mad clear through.

The stranger was back in the bunk when Russ came in. What Russ had heard was the chair being dragged across to the window. Russ slammed the door and backed up against it and said, "Where the hell is this gettin'

you?"

"What?" the stranger asked innocent, for the first time half polite.

That didn't matter to Russ now. "I told you you were safe here. You didn't take my word. You were at the window spyin' on me."

"What if I was?" The stranger wasn't polite no longer.

"Damned if I hadn't ought to kick you out, sick as you are, and let you freeze stiff. I drag you in out of the blizzard and you half wreck the place. I tell you I don't care who you are or what you're runnin' from and, by God, you won't touch the food I give you and you hide your guns. You act like this was your place and I was in your way."

"How'd I know but what you were headin' out of here?"

"Because I told you where I was goin'."

Russ waited. The feller didn't have anything to say. He sat there with his shifty eyes not meeting Russ', his hands busy with a tobacco-sack and a wheat-straw cigarette-paper.

"Now you get this," Russ says. "I'll have to put up with you for a few days. But if you're going to be around, you'll act like a white man. You'll eat what I set before you and you'll soak that damn' foot every hour so it'll get well faster. And the first day you can pull your boot on, you're going to clear out! You got it straight?"

"Sure," said the other. "Only you stay close, see."

Russ saw that all his talking had been wasted. The stranger would trust him only so long as he was in sight. Russ was so blamed mad he was near choking. The stranger sat there with that same smirk on his face. Russ didn't know what to do except leave.

He stood outside for maybe a minute, glaring down at the snow and finally giving the broom by the door a kick that sent it twenty feet out along the path he'd cleared. He was walking over to pick it up again when he happened to look out across the pasture. And what he seen stopped him dead in his tracks.

His cattle had bedded down through the night in the timber opposite. Now they were drifting out of the trees and across to the near fence in bunches, smelling the hay. But what Russ saw was a bunch of animals that wasn't cattle. They was horses, five of them, and four of the five carried riders. One of the ponies was a long-legged buckskin, Mart Woolman's. This Mart Woolman was a big rancher from down the valley. And he wasn't no friend of Russ'. In fact, he was so unfriendly that Russ did a natural thing.

He went back into the cabin and to the cupboard over the table and took down an old horse-pistol that had been his father's. He wasn't sure about the loads because he hadn't used the gun in five years. But they was all he had. He shoved the pistol through the waistband of his trousers and buttoned his coat and started for the door. Halfway there he looked across to see the stranger sitting straight up in the bunk.

"Callers," Russ said and was glad to see the way the feller stiffened, like someone had poked him in the back with a hot iron.

"Who are they?" The feller swung his feet to the floor and started to get up. Then, before Russ could answer, he says, "You keep 'em out of here."

"Don't worry. It'll be a damn' sight colder than it is today before Woolman ever asks himself in to warm by my fire." Russ let it go at that and went out. He was pretty worried.

THE corral was at the clearing end of the barn. Russ waited there for Woolman. As they came through the pasture gate he recognized Nels Sho-

gren as one of the four.

This Shogren was Woolman's foreman. He was mean enough sober and meaner when he'd had liquor, which was often. He wasn't big but he had plenty of meat on his bones. He loved a fight and for about a year now he'd made it hard for Russ and a few other small ranchers up the valley, the main reasons being that a couple of Russ' neighbors had brought in sheep and that some of Woolman's cattle had disappeared. Russ didn't run sheep and wasn't the kind to take a liking to another man's critters. But he'd been blamed along with the others for what went on.

Woolman by himself would have been easy enough to get on with. So it was Shogren Russ hated seeing that morning. He didn't know the other two riders. They looked like a couple of saddle-bums, which might have meant anything.

Russ at first didn't notice the lead-pony, except to see that something like a bedroll folded endways was roped under a dirty tarp on the animal's back. He was mostly watching Nels Shogren.

Woolman stopped twenty feet short of the corral and got down out of his saddle. Shogren did the same, while the other two waited back a ways.

Woolman was a big brute of a man, white haired and with a face that always reminded me of a chunk of rimrock. He was never one to waste words, and he didn't now.

"Ordway," he says, jerking a thumb back over his shoulder. "There's Reese."

Russ got it then. It was a body and not a bed-roll roped under the lead-pony's tarp. He felt funny inside, the way you or I would feel if we was told a friend was dead and being lugged about the country under a dirty strip of canvas like a sack of oats.

"Reese?" Russ said. "Dead?"

"Dead as he'll ever be," Woolman told him. "We caught him red-handed and saw Pastor before he high-tailed into the brush. You was lucky to get away."

"Away from where, Woolman?"

Nels Shogren had his say. "Away from them twenty-three steers of ours you and your sheep-herdin' bunch was driving for the pass. You're comin' along with us to town to see the sheriff, Ordway."

Russ didn't often take talk like that, being called sheepherder and rustler. But he managed to hold rein on his temper somehow. "I got no reason to go to town with you, Shogren. I was at home at eight last night. I been here ever since."

"You can tell that to the Sheriff," Shogren says. He reached up and unbuckled the two middle loops of his sheep-lined coat, which was so long it dragged in the snow. "You're comin' with us or, by God, I'll . . ."

Russ saw several things at once. He saw the cedar handle of a six-gun in under Shogren's coat. He saw Woolman take a step in toward him. The two riders had drifted closer behind Woolman. He saw he was cornered.

Russ had some of the banty rooster in him, like all undersized men. Right then what he felt was the horse-pistol jabbing him in his stomach. He made a reach for it as Shogren's hand came out from under his coat.

Woolman yelled, "Look out, Nels!" and made a dive for Russ. He caught a hold on him and pinned his arms to his sides.

Shogren jerked his pistol clear. He was swinging it over at Russ when a puff of snow jumped up out of nowhere right in front of him and a sharp explosion cut loose from up by the cabin. Shogren jumped back and whirled around in time to see blue powder-smoke drifting away from the cabin's

open window.

Woolman wasn't no fool. He knew a rifle-shot when he heard one. He let go of Russ and edged across toward his pony, Shogren following.

"So you got help, huh?" Shogren said.

"You're damn' right I have," Russ said. He cocked the horse-pistol and held it on Shogren. "Now make tracks!" he says.

THEY did. Shogren stopped at the pasture gate long enough to call, "We ain't through with you, Ordway," before he went on.

Russ was getting the after-effects of coming close to killing a man. His hand shook and he dropped the pistol in his pocket. He was sweating. He was glad when Woolman and the rest rode into the trees opposite. They'd left the pasture gate open so Russ walked down and closed it, thinking of the stranger and what he'd done for him. He started back toward the cabin.

Halfway across the yard, he turned off to the barn, thinking damned if he'd thank a man who was so short on thanks of his own, even if he had pulled him out of a tight spot. There was plenty of bile working in Russ right then, first against the stranger and last against Nels Shogren. So he pitched into forking that hay and for an hour and a half he worked like billy-hell, hauling a wagon-load of the hay down to the pasture fence and forking it out to his critters. When he was finished, after he'd unhitched his team, he thought different about the whole thing. He went up to the cabin.

The stranger was in the bunk. He had a long-bladed knife and was whittling at a stick of firewood. The floor was littered with shavings, a mess. Over near the window, Russ' .30-.30 Winchester leaned against the wall.

Russ said, "I'd be layin' out there now if it wasn't for you."

The feller went right on whittling for a minute. Then he says, "I heard most of it. Who's this Shogren?"

Russ told him.

"And who stole Woolman's critters?"

"Pastor and Reese, it looks like. They're both sheepmen. Pastor's bad all the way through. Reese didn't have a mind of his own."

"I don't suppose you know nothin' about it, eh?" the stranger asks, with a smile on his face that meant he only half believed what Russ had been telling him.

Right then Russ peeled off his coat and started for the bunk, telling the feller, "So I'm a liar, huh? Pile out of there. I'm goin' to finish what the blizzard started last night."

The stranger quit his whittling. "Cool off, Ordway," he says. "No offense meant. Hell, I'll take your word for it."

He was nice about it, nice compared to what he had been, and it took Russ by surprise. Then, before Russ could get steamed up again, the feller asked, "Who was the others?"

Russ said they were strangers, more than likely men hired for just such a time as this, to back Shogren in one of his fights.

"Looked like they could take care of themselves," the stranger agreed, and from then on he spoke a little more cordial and Russ decided he'd have another try at getting on with him. He'd learned by now that the feller's mind didn't work the way his did, that he was crooked clear through.

Nothing much happened after that. Russ kept heating water for the feller's bad foot and didn't even mind cleaning up after him, the shavings and such. Then along about dark the stranger asked for a couple of aspen branches and some baling wire and made himself a crutch. And he ate his meals from

then on, like he liked them.

The next morning, the first thing Russ did after breakfast was to go down to the corral and start a cold-shoeing job on his best horse. Pretty soon the stranger came hobbling down from the cabin on his crutch. He had his coat on and a gunnysack wrapped around his foot. He stood in the barn door watching Russ work.

"It ain't so cold today," he said.

Russ knew he was thinking about leaving. He seemed to be in pretty fair shape, none the worse for his freezing but for the bad ankle.

Pretty soon the stranger got around to it. "How much would you take for that lughead?" he asks.

Russ said, "I've got a mare in the stable there I'll sell you for fifty dollars. She's old and fat but she'll get you where you want to go. There's an old saddle in there we can fix up. It'll cost you another fifteen."

The feller sort of frowned and looked off across the pasture. Russ saw his face all at once change and go pale. Then the stranger says, "You've got another caller, Ordway."

RUSS seen then that a rider had cut out from the trees on the near side. "Looks like Tom Cuddeback," he told the stranger.

"Who's Cuddeback?"

"Sheriff," Russ says.

He was looking at the stranger when he let that fly and he was sorry later he broke the news so sudden. The feller forgot his crutch in his hurry to get back in the door and he stepped on his game leg and it took what color was left out of his face.

"Go out and meet him," he said. "Keep him away from here."

Russ laid down his hammer and his nails and hit his horse across the rump so that he moved away from the corral gate. It never occurred to him to do anything but what the stranger wanted him to, since he knew that this feller wasn't anxious to meet up with the law and he'd have given even a mangy dog what chance he could. He went out the gate and met Cuddeback as he rode into the yard.

Tom Cuddeback was an old man, so thin you'd swear a high wind would blow him out of the saddle. He wore a bear-skin coat, good and warm it was, but even with that and the weather milder his face was pinched and blue from the cold and his moustache was frosted where he'd been breathing through it.

It wasn't hard to get him up to the cabin and in alongside the stove. Russ got him a cup of coffee. As soon as Cuddeback had thawed out a little, he asked, "Seen any strangers up this way, Ordway?"

Russ shook his head, glad at first that Cubbeback hadn't mentioned Woolman and then wondering what would happen if Cuddeback caught him in the lie. The sheriff didn't call him on it but fished in under his bear rug and brought out some folded papers, which he handed to Russ. "Have a look," he says.

While Russ was unfolding the papers, he went on, "A hell of a thing happened down at Buckman the other night. A feller held up the D. & R. G. and killed a baggage-master, all for the hundred and thirty-six dollars in the express-car safe. A U. S. Deputy Marshal in Santa Fe got up a posse and followed the feller up here as far as Los Pintos before the blizzard hit the other night. The man we're after is one of them three."

The papers Cuddeback had given Russ was three reward dodgers with pictures on them. And, sure enough, one of the three was the stranger. Russ swallowed hard when he read that this feller, Pete Annis by name, was wanted

for two murders, one of a peace officer up in Farmington and the other for the knifing of a native in Bernalillo. And he'd killed this baggage-master, too.

Russ thought a minute. He tossed the papers on the table and went over to the corner to get his Winchester .30-.30. "Tom," he says, "the man you're lookin' for is down in the barn." And he made for the door.

He was in time to see this Pete Annis cutting off through the trees beyond the barn, ridin' his best horse and forkin' his good saddle. Russ took one shot at him before Cuddeback pushed him out of the way and emptied his six-gun at him. They both missed and Annis rode out of sight in the timber.

Russ saddled his mare and they took out after him, Russ telling the sheriff his story on the way. He was so mad he couldn't talk straight. About noon it started to snow, and a quarter hour later the sign of Pete Annis' horse was blanketed out. They come on back to Russ' place.

The last thing Cuddeback did before he left for town was to give Russ some advice. Woolman had brought in Devoe and Martinez, two of Russ' neighbors, and asked to have warrants sworn out against them. Cuddeback had refused on lack of evidence. "But he ain't through, Russ," he said just before he rode off. "Woolman said he'd take matters into his own hands. I happen to know he hired at least three no good strangers in town last night. You be careful."

It didn't happen until five days later. About four in the afternoon Mike Devoe and Tranquilano Martinez and Paul Jenkins and Ralph Pastor rode in at Russ' place. They was his neighbors from up and down the valley. Russ invited them into the cabin and Devoe told the story. The night before someone had used giant-powder on Willow Creek dam, blown it clean out and let a small lake down on Woolman's fields. And that morning Shogren had come to Pastor's place about noon and burned his cabin and barn to the ground. Pastor had gone to Devoe's and they had been waiting for Shogren and sent a few shots at him and his men and driven them off. They'd gathered up the others and come up here to see what ideas Russ had.

RUSS lit into Pastor first thing. "You was with Reese the other day, Ralph. It was you that blew out the dam, own up to it." But Pastor wouldn't say anything, although they could see he knew more than he was telling.

They stalled around awhile, first one and then the other suggesting what to do. Jenkins said he was pulling out because of his family. He rode away about dusk toward town. Martinez didn't know which way to go, to stay and fight or to follow Jenkins. By that time they had agreed it would likely wind up in a scrap. Devoe and Russ, of course, were hanging on. Pastor didn't say much.

Russ wanted to think. He noticed that the wood-box by the stove was empty and went out to the woodpile and started work with his axe. It was nearly dark, with a thin new moon edging up over the peaks and giving a little light. It was because of this light that Russ saw something move back in the trees, off to one side. He turned and saw a man coming toward him.

It was the stranger, Pete Annis. Russ got a good hold on the axe and waited.

Annis came up almost close enough for Russ to reach him and then stopped. "I ain't got much time," he said. Then he saw the axe and backed off a little. "I got something to tell you, Ordway."

"Be damned quick about it," Russ says. "And what about that horse and

that hull you swiped off me?"

Annis said, "That's another thing I wanted to square up." He reached into a pocket of his coat and tossed something into the snow at Russ' feet. "There's your money. I need that horse. You can get another."

Russ leaned down and picked up what Annis had thrown. It was a wad of bills. Annis seemed different tonight. He talked different, more like a man ought to act toward one who'd pulled him out of a tight spot.

"I ain't got much time," Annis said again. "Today I ran into a bird I used to know. He's workin' for Woolman. He told me something you'd maybe like to know. Tonight Nels Shogren is bringing a crew up here to shoot up your bunch and fire your place."

"That's no news. We knew they'd try it sooner or later. We'll be ready."

Annis seemed relieved. "If you use your heads, you can fort up in the timber around here and make it hot for Shogren. Don't give him a chance, because he ain't going to give you any. Another thing. Watch this Pastor."

"What about Pastor?" Russ asked.

"It's been him and Shogren all along. Shogren's got his eye on this valley, wants it for himself. So he's hired Pastor to make trouble between your bunch and Woolman, hopin' to drive you out."

"That couldn't be," Russ says. "Shogren shot Reese."

"Because him and Pastor didn't get those stolen critters away fast enough. Woolman caught them by mistake and Shogren did the best he could. He shot Reese and now he's after Pastor so as to stop him from talkin'."

Russ thought it over a minute. "How do I know you ain't lying?"

Annis said, "You may be stubborn but you ain't dumb, Ordway." Then he thought of something else. "I got to be headin' out of here." He turned and walked off a ways, toward the trees, and stopped and called back, "This squares us, don't it?"

"If it works out the way you say."

"It will," Annis says, and he went.

It did, too. Russ went back into the cabin, and without telling the others where he'd got his ideas, he laid the whole thing before Pastor. Pastor made a break for the door and Devoe caught him. They tied him up and put him on the floor and left the light on in the cabin. Russ placed his men outside. He had only two. Devoe went into the barn loft with his shotgun and Martinez into the trees across the clearing with an old Stevens .22 single-hot of Russ'. Russ himself took to the trees alongside the cabin with that .30-.30 Winchester. They waited for Shogren to show up.

In less than an hour Russ saw a bunch of riders coming across the pasture. It was moonlight, remember, and with the moon on snow a man can see a good ways.

THINGS didn't go exactly as Russ had planned. Devoe opened up before he should have, right after the bunch had got inside the pasture gate. He let go with both barrels and a man screamed and went down and the horses started milling around. Shogren's men shot at everything in sight, barn, cabin, and with the moon a man can see good.

Russ and Martinez got Shogren, who tried to bring his men on up to the cabin and was trapped when they didn't follow. He died before his horse threw him. Once he was down, his bunch bolted for the pasture gate. They went through in such a jam that one feller was scraped out of his saddle by a fence-post and was lamed and lost his horse. Russ and Devoe caught him before he made the woods and took his gun away and brought him back.

They rode down to Los Pintos that

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night, packing two bodies on Russ's old mare and bringing in Pastor and this gunfighter of Shogren's tied on their horses. They got Tom Cuddeback out of bed at midnight and gave him the truth on what had happened. The sheriff locked Pastor and this gunfighter in the jail.

Woolman was in town before daybreak the next morning, after one of Cuddeback's deputies had gone out to his place after him. He was a scared man, since he'd left things pretty much up to Shogren and hadn't known what his foreman was doing. He offered to make it up to Russ and the others the best he could, but there wasn't much they wanted except to be let alone.

Russ finally told Cuddeback how he'd set the trap and about Pete Annis. They both agreed that Annis should be found and brought in. Cuddeback and three men left early in the morning for the hills, after the sheriff had told Russ to stay set in town that day.

Along about dark Cuddeback and his men rode in to Los Pintos. They had Russ's horse and saddle and what was left of Pete Annis. They'd found him up around timberline just short of the pass, lying in the snow and with the back of his head blowed off. Cuddeback said there were tracks showing where a man had followed him, caught up with him and gone on.

None of them could figure it out who had got Annis. Cuddeback had the idea that finally worked. He took Pastor and this gunfighter of Shogren's out of their cells at the jail and showed them Annis's body. This gunfighter recognized him.

Sure, he knew the dead man. Two days ago Annis had hired out to Shogren. No one knew where he came from but he was the kind Shogren was looking for. The night of the fight, Shogren had sent Annis on ahead to see if Russ and his bunch was in the cabin. He'd come back saying everything was set. Then, when they started across the pasture, Shogren missed Annis and sent a man back to see what had happened to him.

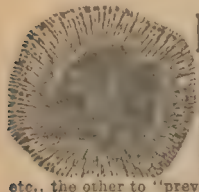
"I reckon the man that took out after him knew what he'd done," Cuddeback's prisoner says. "I'm damned glad the sidewinder got what was coming."

Russ wasn't. After all, Annis had done a fine thing, and Russ gave him credit. But here's another funny thing about the feller. That morning Russ was fishing through his pockets and come onto the roll of money Annis had give him for his horse and saddle. It felt like quite a wad but there was only nine one dollar bills. They found the rest of that D. & R. G. money in one of Annis's pockets. He could have paid Russ all he owed him but didn't.

SHERIFF BOB BRUCE was through with his story, or appeared to be. I waited a minute to make sure and then took out my notebook and looked at something I'd written in it.

"Let's see," I said. "Your initials are R. O. B. Were you Russ Ordway?"

Bruce shook his head. "No. I got to know Russ later. I was that prisoner of Cuddeback's."



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Gunsmoke Masquerade

By JAY KARTH

Author of "Hot Lead for Rustlers," etc.

The Reno Kid would be waiting there in the dust gun-hung, and it would not be his bullets that Corey Shannon would fear, nor the Colt-magic that was in the Kid's two hands!

THERE was a great fear in Corey Shannon's heart that the lean man striding grimly toward him up the middle of Navajo's dust-filled street would not back down. Corey, his boot heels deep in the powdery dust midway between Doane's Livery Stable and Joe Velasco's Chili Parlor, watched the inexorable advance with varying emotions. The features of the leathery face he could not see, excepting as a dim outline in the shadows of the wide brimmed Stetson, yet he knew every line of them as well as if they were his own.

Looking beyond the approaching man's left shoulder he saw the white face of Mordick, the undertaker, pressed against the window of his establishment. A faint feeling of surprise ran through him as he caught what appeared to be deep-rooted regret in Mordick's face.

Corey's sharp blue eyes swung back to the man marching fifty feet down the street. There was no other life visible now, excepting along the borders, behind the doors and windows of the false-fronted buildings.

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"You better change your mind, Tad."

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30x5.00-20	2.40	1.00
29x5.00-19	2.45	1.15
28x5.25-18	2.45	1.15
29x5.25-19	2.45	1.15
30x5.25-20	2.50	1.15
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29x5.50-19	2.75	1.15
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Corey's voice was flat, unbending. "There's still time."

The other man's features stood out now. His thin, high-boned face held a look of derision as he swung to a careful halt twenty feet away. He shook his head impatiently. "Same old Corey," he spoke through lips that were a hard, straight line, "still givin' orders."

"Maybe you ain't heard," said Corey steadily, "but the law has come to Arizona—come to stay—and the Tonto ain't no exception. There ain't no place for them that breaks it."

Tad's red lips curled. "Quit preachin'," he snapped thinly, "and play out your hand."

"It's your move."

The lean Tad's draw motion was an unhurried movement, beautiful to watch; unhurried; yet no man of those sheltered behind the walls of the buildings along the street could say truthfully that he followed Tad's hand through the sweeping stab for his gun. It was that fast.

And so it was with deep-rooted amazement that those onlookers, whose ears caught only one thundering, rolling crash of sound, saw him cave at the middle, to crash forward on his face and roll over on his back in the dust. It was with still greater amazement that they saw Corey still on his feet, smoke streamers curling out of his gun-muzzle into the still air.

There was no triumph in Corey's eyes as he walked slowly toward the prone figure, his own left arm strangely limp. The muscles at the base of his jaw were pulled into hard knots, and a bitter sad-

ness ran through him. He dropped to one knee beside Tad's prone figure.

"Corey."

"I'm sorry, Tad."

There was a rattle in Tad's throat. His eyes filmed, but he fought his way back. He gasped, "Guess it's better—this—way." He struggled to lift his head. "Corey."

"Yeah?"

"Listen."

Corey bent low to catch the faint words. He nodded, and gripped Tad's arm just as a shudder shook the lean figure. Corey held the arm for a moment, then lowered it into the dust. Tad was dead.

"YOU'RE under arrest, Stranger!"

Four men faced Corey. All kept their right hands close to their gun-butts. One, a black-haired man, wore a sheriff's star on his vest lapel.

"You're under arrest." The same voice repeated the words, and Corey was not surprised to see that the speaker was not the sheriff, but the thick-bodied man standing on the lawman's right.

Corey looked at him briefly, then spoke to the sheriff.

"You takin' me in, Sheriff?"

The black-haired law-man nodded. "Looks like I got to," he said. He nodded toward the big man. "Lake Yount here claims you didn't give his hand," the sheriff mentioned toward the dead man, "any chance at all. Mr. King here, President of the bank, says the same thing. I'll have to hold you legal-like while I investigate."

"That's right, Sheriff." This was the fat little man on the sheriff's left. "If ever I saw cold blooded murder, this was it."

Corey's sharp blue eyes speared first at Yount, then at the banker King. They shifted uncomfortably. Corey's hard glance travelled on to the fourth

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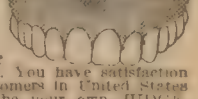

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member of the group, a stocky man whose face was twisted by a jagged scar.

"Who is this one," Corey murmured, "another one of Yount's killers?"

"You be careful, Stranger," snapped the sheriff. "Lake Yount's done about as much to make the Tonto country safe for honest cowmen as anybody has."

"Did you say the Tonto was safe, Sheriff?" There was a jeering note in Corey's voice. His sharp glance again speared the thick-bodied Yount. "Last I heard the Governor was figurin' to send troops in here." Corey said, to Yount, "You say this man rode for you?" He indicated the dead Tad.

"The Reno Kid was my top hand." Yount watched Corey warily, his deep-set eyes suspicious of Corey's intent. "And since you ask," Yount added, "Fox Nelson here's my foreman." He jerked his hand toward the fourth man.

"I'll go with you, Sheriff," said Corey bluntly, "but I ain't givin' up my guns until we're in the jail-house, and these two buzzards are outside." He looked hard at Yount and Fox Nelson.

"Why, you—" Yount's thick-fingered hand jerked toward his holster.

"Yount!" The sheriff's voice cut like a bull-whip.

Lake Yount's head dropped lower, so that the massive chin seemed to rest on his chest. He scowled stubbornly. But his hand dropped away from his gun.

"I'll handle this," said the sheriff coldly.

Yount's thick lips drew back in a mirthless smile. "Yeah—sure." He turned abruptly, growling across his shoulder, "let's get a drink," to the banker King, and Fox Nelson, his foreman. King turned with him. The sharp featured Nelson, after a long hard look at Corey, followed.

"All right, Stranger," said the sheriff.

"I don't guess you're Yount's man after all, Sheriff," Corey leaned against the door bars of the jail's one cell. He favored his left shoulder, which Sheriff Ennis had bandaged. Ennis sat loosely in his desk chair.

"What name did you say you answered to?" Ennis rose to his feet, as if he had been waiting for this moment, and moved casually across to the cell door.

"People mostly call me Corey Shannon—"

"Arizona Rangers, huh?" The sheriff's voice was low-pitched now. "I had word from Cap' Crawford you'd be driftin' in soon—"

Corey waited, his blue eyes centered on Ennis' red face.

THE sheriff said, "But I think you're barkin' up the wrong tree about Lake Yount, Shannon."

"Wrong about what?"

Ennis was suddenly confused. "I wish you'd trust me," he said.

"I only called Yount a buzzard, which ain't quite the word."

The sheriff looked at Corey for a moment. Then, shrugging, he unlocked the cell door, handing Corey his gun-belt and guns.

"Play it your way," he said. "Only don't break no laws in this county, Shannon. If you do, I'll run you in and throw away the key—"

"Sorry, Sheriff," said Corey. "I had to be sure about you—here, help me with this belt, will you." A moment later he said. "Thanks." He looked steadily at Ennis. "You recollect the Arizona Drover's Bank was held up in Yavapai, yonder beyond the Mogollan Rim, three weeks ago, with the cashier killed?"

"Sure," grunted Ennis, "ain't I got reward notices nailed all over this office? But what's that got to do with Yount?"

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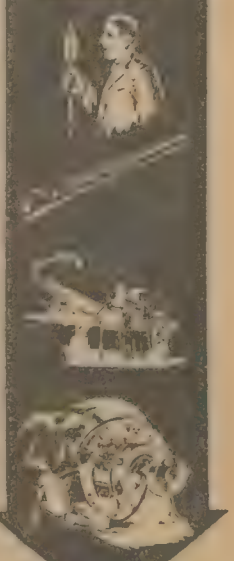

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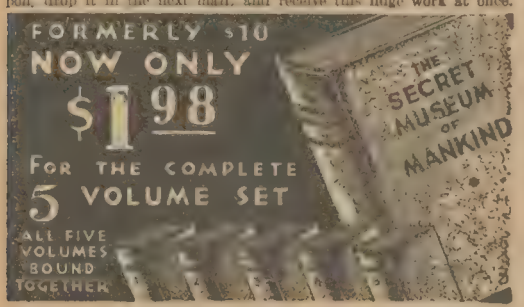

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"Lake Yount's men did that job!"

Ennis snorted, "Halls of Tophet, Lake Yount's boss of the Lazy-W, the biggest spread south of the Rim—you're crazy."

"He's also the biggest rustler in these parts."

"You're just guessin'—"

"I was, until an hour ago."

"What do you mean?"

Corey bent his head toward the street.

"You mean the Reno Kid—the man you smoked down out yonder? You mean he told you this?"

"Yeah—"

"And you believed him?"

"Yeah."

Ennis shook his head stubbornly. "I'm sorry, Shannon. I can't take a dead man's word against what I know about Lake Yount."

Corey's blue eyes were very hard, very cold. "You will this time, Ennis. I got the power to make you side me if I feel like I need help—"

"You mean you're orderin' me to help you bring in Yount?" The sheriff's lips tightened stubbornly.

"No. But you're goin' to help me save *your* bank from bein' robbed tonight!"

A cold wind swept across the Tonto from the snow-covered rim of the Mogollans, off north. Corey and Ennis had been hunkered down behind the buckboard thirty feet from the rear door of the bank for four hours now, since eight o'clock.

Ennis moved his shoulders impatiently. He leaned toward Corey to speak, but Corey's good right hand stopped him. Corey stared intently off into the shadows down the row of buildings. Now he pointed. Three riders rode out of the shadows and halted their mounts near the buckboard.

"You think that dumb sheriff's in a safe spot, Lake?" That was Fox Nel-

son's harsh voice. "He ain't been around the Gilded Lady all night—"

"Don't you know he's got himself a prisoner to watch." Lake Yount chuckled. "You couldn't get him out of that jail with a bull-whip."

"Reckon you're right."

"Fox," Yount dismounted, approaching the buckboard behind which Corey and Ennis crouched, "you stay outside here—and stand lookout." He tied the horse to the opposite wheel of the buckboard. Fox Nelson followed suit, then reached for the reins of the third man's horse. This man remained silent. They moved to the rear of the bank. A key grated in the lock, and two of them disappeared inside.

"NELSON," called Corey softly. He stood erect and stepped away from the buckboard.

Fox Nelson stiffened. He cursed. Corey saw light flash on metal, and his own right hand blurred for his gun. The gun bucked in his hand twice, blasting the Lazy-W foreman back against the wall of the building. He slid down, coming to rest with his back against the wall, in a sitting posture.

A dog yelped somewhere along the row of buildings. Corey heard a shout, as someone in the street beyond the bank spread the alarm.

"Stay here, Ennis," said Corey softly to the shadowy figure of the peace officer.

"What you goin' to do?"

"I figure they'll think if they hit the street nobody'll believe they could be guilty of robbin' the bank," said Corey swiftly. "But if they do come this way, don't wait—you blast them both."

"You be careful," whispered Ennis, "and don't worry none about me."

"You've come to the end of the trail, Yount," called Corey. He had figured Yount's play correctly. The big man stood at the end of the Gilded Lady

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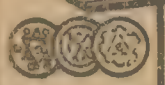

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hitch-rack, the reins of a rangy dun horse in his hands.

Yount dropped the reins and moved his ponderous figure clear of the horses at the rack. "That man robbed the bank," he shouted, pointing his left hand at Corey.

Townsmen formed a threatening front. The crowd was growing rapidly, would soon be out of control.

Corey tossed a gleaming object in their midst. It fell on the plank walk with a metallic clatter. He heard the words, "Ranger!" as he moved into the street toward Lake Yount. The crowd gave way. A lane opened between Corey and Yount.

"Law's caught up with you, Yount," called Corey softly. "You're under arrest."

The roar of a gun came from behind the bank just as Corey saw Yount's right hand sweep swiftly toward the black handle of his gun.

Corey's right hand blurred. Twin thunder rolled along the street. Now a single gun thundered twice again. The crowd pressed back with the first rolling crash of sound, then closed in as the big body crashed stiffly to earth.

Sheriff Ennis appeared in the door of the bank. "It was King," he said, "a-helpin' to rob his own bank."

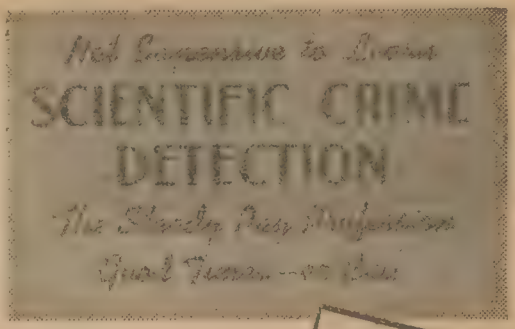
Corey nodded, holstering his long-barreled .41. The two men came together. Corey said, "Thought so."

"You sure had Lake Yount figured right," said Ennis.

Corey looked down at the dust of the street where the Reno Kid had died a few hours ago. He murmured, "Thanks, Tad—"

"Shannon," said Sheriff Ennis, "what made you so sure the Reno Kid wasn't stringin' you?"

"Sometimes," said Corey softly, "ridin' for the law's a hard chore." He looked at the sheriff very soberly. "The Reno Kid was my brother . . ."



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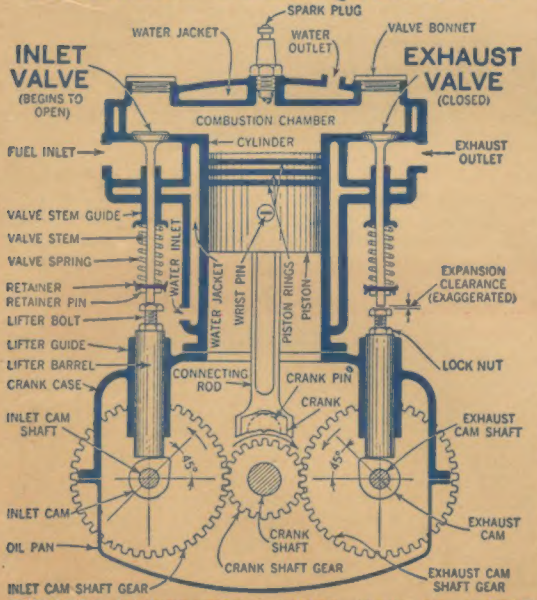

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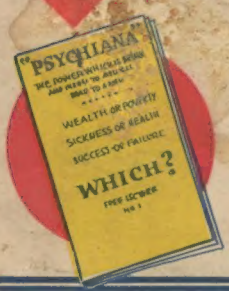

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